

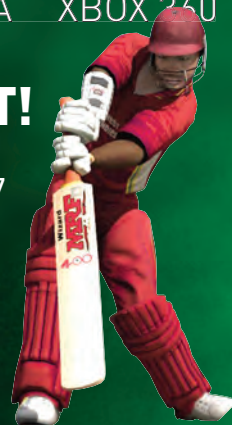
NAG

VOL 10 ISSUE 1 04.2007

SA EXCLUSIVE REVIEW!

HOWZAT!

BRIAN LARA
CRICKET 2007
HITS THE 360



COMMAND & CONQUER

T I B E R I U M W A R S

SOUTH AFRICA'S LEADING GAMING, COMPUTER & TECHNOLOGY MAGAZINE

BIGGEST ISSUE
IN THE HISTORY OF EVER
172
PAGES

If the DVD is missing, it's said green
doesn't work with its eyes.



**TOMORROW'S
CONSOLE?**

We take a look at the PS3



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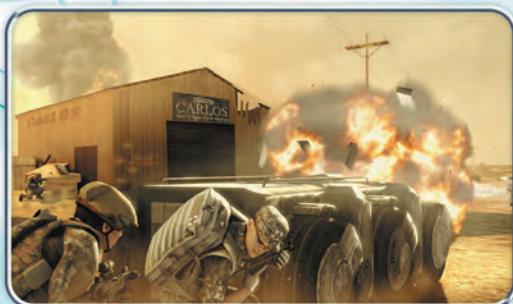


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PC



THE SIMS 2 R149⁹⁵
CELEBRATION STUFF
(61323)



DESPERATE HOUSEWIVES R249⁹⁵
THE GAME (61325)



R299⁹⁵
EACH

► Command and Conquer 3 Tiberium Wars (61322) ► Ghost Recon Advanced Warfighter 2 (61324)
► Supreme Commander (61326) ► Stalker (61327) ► Titan Quest Immortal Throne (61328)

PSP



(PlayStation Portable)

► Features an 11.25cm full colour TFT screen ► Stereo speakers
► Wireless capabilities ► Games & movies load from a UMD (Universal Media Disc) ► 4 Hours playing time battery life
► Includes 1GB Memory Stick (50971)

R2 749⁹⁵
R168pm x 24



Logitech R99⁹⁵
PLAYGEAR SHARE

► Audio splitter for your PSP
► Allows two people to listen to music or movies on your PSP (51127)



Logitech R149⁹⁵
PLAYGEAR STEALTH

► Precision audio for your PSP (51728)



Logitech R199⁹⁵
PLAYGEAR POCKET

► Protects your PSP while you play, offering full gaming control access
► Unique desktop stand feature (50403) ► PSP not included



CALL OF DUTY 3 - ROAD TO VICTORY
(61330)

R399⁹⁵



► Ghost Recon 2 Advanced Warfighter (61329)
► Prince of Persia Rival Swords (60379)

R449⁹⁵
EACH

XBOX 360



XBOX 360 R226pm x 24
► Console with chrome DVD tray ► 20GB hard drive ► Wireless controller with 2 x AA batteries ► Ethernet connectivity cable ► Component HD AV cable ► Headset ► Power supply & cord (59524)



XBOX 360 WIRELESS WINDOWS PC ADAPTER (61337)

R249⁹⁵



XBOX 360 QUICK CHARGE KIT (61335)

R349⁹⁵



► Gears of War (60185) ► Crackdown (60184) ► Need for Speed Carbon (59733)

R499⁹⁵
EACH



FUZION FRENZY 2 (60999)

R399⁹⁵

PlayStation®2



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(K Chassis)
R1 599⁹⁵
R98pm x 24
► Quarter of the size ► Built-in modem (5521)



PlayStation®2
DUAL SHOCK CONTROLLER
► Analogue control with pressure sensitive action buttons and analogue sticks ► Built-in vibration function ► Compatible with all PS games
► Available in silver or black (5522, 22655)
R279⁹⁵ EACH



PlayStation®2
8MB SILVER OR BLACK MEMORY CARD
► Essential for saving games (55231, 22610)
R199⁹⁵ EACH



► Burnout Dominator (61333)
► Medal of Honor Vanguard (61334)
R399⁹⁵ EACH



► Ghost Rider (61332)
R399⁹⁵



► God Hand (61331)
R499⁹⁵

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PLAYSTATION®3
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► 4 USB 2.0 ports ► Bluetooth 2.0 ► Supports Memory Stick, SD, CompactFlash & USB mass storage class devices
► Blu-ray, DVD, CD & SACD disc media ► Backwards compatible with all PS2 & PS1 games (61338)
R6 299⁹⁵
R385pm x 24



PLAYSTATION®3 BLUETOOTH BD REMOTE CONTROLLER (61341)
R499⁹⁵



PLAYSTATION®3 CONTROLLER
► Wireless / Bluetooth™ ► Motion sensor (61339)
R499⁹⁵



MARVEL ULTIMATE ALLIANCE (61346)
R499⁹⁵



► Call of Duty 3 (61345)
► Tony Hawk's Project 8 (61347)
R549⁹⁵ EACH



► Resistance: Fall of Man (61342) ► Formula one: Champion Edition (61343) ► Motostorm (61344)
R569⁹⁵ EACH

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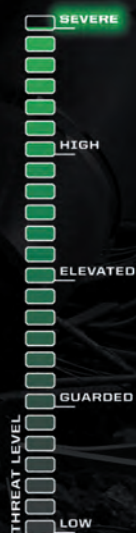
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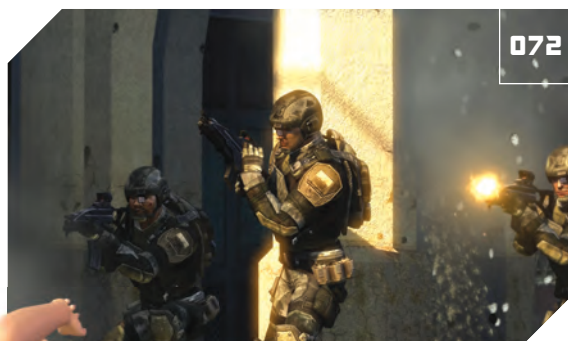
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 Infernal
 Peggle
 Penumbra: Overture
 Runaway 2: The Dream of the Turtle
 Sam & Max Episode 3: The Mole, the Mob and the Meatball
 Sam & Max Episode 4: Abe Lincoln Must Die
 Shadowgrounds
 Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles

DRIVERS

NVIDIA\ Vista\ 32-bit\ 100.65_winvista_32bit_international
 NVIDIA\ Vista\ 64-bit\ 100.65_winvista_64bit_international
 NVIDIA\ XP\ 93.71_forceware_winxp2k_english_whql

FREE GAMES

Knytt

MAPS

Company of Heroes (Wake Island)

MMORPG

9Dragons
 R.O.S.E. Online

MODIFICATION TOOLS

Half-Life 2 [Tool Pack v1.20]

MODIFICATIONS

Half-Life (Natural Selection)
 Half-Life 2 (Insects)
 Half-Life 2 (Iron Grip: The Oppression)
 Half-Life 2 (The Battlegrounds)

MOVIE TRAILERS

The Simpsons Movie [new extended trailer]

PATCHES

Armed Assault [Arma_Euro104Update105]
 Battlefield 2142 [BF2142 v1.19b - v1.20]
 Prey [Prey v1.3]
 Quake 4 [Quake 4 v1.4.0 -beta]
 World of Warcraft [WoW-2.0.7.6383-to-2.0.8.6403-enGB-patch]
 World of Warcraft [WoW-2.0.7.6383-to-2.0.8.6403-enUS-patch]
 World of Warcraft [wow-2.0.8.6403-to-2.0.10.6448-enus-patch]

TRAILERS

Age of Conan
 Battlefield: Bad Company
 BF2142: Northern Strike
 Bioshock
 Command & Conquer 3: Tiberium Wars Cinema Trailer
 Command & Conquer 3: Tiberium Wars Invasion
 CryTek 2 [GDC 2007] Sandbox Demo
 CryTek 2 [GDC 2007] Tech Trailer
 Fable 2
 Ghost Rider
 GRAW 2 Gimme Danger
 Jade Empire Special Edition
 LittleBigPlanet
 Manhunt 2
 Skate
 S.T.A.L.K.E.R. Shadow of Chernobyl
 Supreme Commander
 Titan Quest: Immortal Throne
 TM United Webisode 3
 Vampires Rain

UTILITIES

Antivirus [Avast v4.7]
 Browser [Firefox v2.0.0.2]
 Dictionary [WordWeb v4.5a]
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 IRC [mIRC v6.21]
 Music Player [Winamp v5.33]

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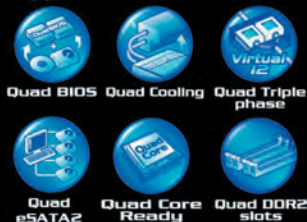
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TECHNOLOGY

LET ME START WITH an apology. Firstly, due to problems on the distribution side of things (which is handled by a company we contract), subscriptions arrived very late and in some cases not at all. We're working to ensure it doesn't happen again and that you get your magazine. Secondly, Miktar and I both sit with egg on our face. The gloss cover change was decided somewhere else and we didn't know it was permanent. It is, and we matte fans are all disappointed. But just to quell a rumour: this doesn't mean *NAG* is doomed or doing poorly. It had more to do with *Custom PC SA's* untimely departure. *NAG* is as fit as a fiddle. In fact, it's a little fat...

The 172 pages are quite nice, aren't they? This, like anything in magazines, is an inexact science, but this means that *NAG's* middle ground is closer to 148 pages than 124. Maybe somewhere in the future *NAG* will be a 172-page magazine, but that will take a while. If we had to produce one of these monsters every month, we wouldn't get around to playing any games at all. But filling that space won't be hard. The US gaming industry has just recorded record months in 2007 – much higher than anyone expected. The industry is full of analysts who really guess and quickly admit it when they are completely wrong, but also take the credit when they are vaguely right. Who will win the next-gen wars? There is an analyst or report out there for any point of view: from PS3 dominance to *Mario* fever to everyone getting along. The real question is: Do you really care? Do you? Does it matter who is doing what? We play games because we play games. If ten years from now Microsoft and Sony's consoles are replaced by LG and Samsung's, we'll still be playing games.

The PS3 is here and it is a really nice machine, though you can't help but lament the price tag. Still, price cuts in Japan and some good title releases have stirred growing momentum in PS3 sales. I don't really care who wins, since I'll eventually get all the consoles. But it's going to be a dirty fight between Microsoft and Sony. Very dirty! Let's hope that means awesome games that sacrifice the two console giants' entire development teams just to get things done. Martyr games!

PS: Enjoy the R50 game voucher in this mag. Buy something for your mom.

James Francis
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NAG

NAG is not available in large format print, brail or on audio tape.

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I pity the April Fools!

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LETTER OF THE MOMENT

FROM: SaintDJ**SUBJECT:** Videogames: The reason for violence in our society

I REFER TO THE ARTICLE "Videogames blamed for German school shooting" in Bytes of the January 2007 issue of *NAG*. I am getting sick and tired of people from communities who blame videogames for shootings at schools. I am 34 years old and have been playing videogames since I was 10 years old. The first games I played were on the Atari console. One of these games was a violent game: *Outlaw*. Since then, I have been playing a lot of other violent games. I shoot a lot of bad asses and I like it. It lets me blow off steam. My work causes me to stress a lot and I work with people who challenge my temper every day. Yet, I don't take my pistol and kill my colleagues.

The coalition of German 'moral' authorities and the priest, Germogen Tucker, who want to ban 'killer' games should ask themselves some serious questions before doing so. They should be careful that gamers don't turn their 'violence' on the critics and kill them all for doing so. I am only joking. Let's get serious.

The parties mentioned above are regarded as protectors of public morality. They are trying to cure the symptoms of what happened at the school where the

shooting took place, and not the cause. Cure the symptom and the problem will resurface, but cure the cause and solve the problem. The shooting was the symptom of a disease that has nothing or very little to do with videogames. If the games were not the cause, then what was?

Why did the boy kill his classmates? Because he was pissed off by them. Why was he pissed off by them? Because they are "... arseholes who wrecked my life..." What did they do to this boy? Good grief; that is a moral issue for crying out loud. They probably humiliated, offended and mocked him without taking his feelings into account and never said sorry for doing so. And the righteous people say this boy's playing videogames is a moral issue. They should all go and study psychology, and if they did, they should ask their educational fees back, because they have no idea what it is all about.

The real problem is that morality doesn't exist amongst the people who caused that boy his misery in the first place. They should be accused of that boy's murder. I am not justifying what the boy did, but I am definitely condemning the ones who caused his situation.

These moralists should look at the cause of the problem and not try and cure the symptom. That is their damn duty to society. But hey, it's easy to crucify the nut who



The 'Letter of the Moment' prize is sponsored by EA South Africa. The winner receives two games for coming up with the most eclectic chicken scratch.

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TOPIC FOR NEXT MONTH:
Did you buy a PS3?

shot everyone, because he's the arsehole. They should visit schools, teach kids about how they should treat others and what the consequences can be if they don't. Heck, they should read their Bibles for a change and start caring about what they do to other people.

Videogames are not the culprits. The arseholes who invoke people to do 'killer' things are!

But gaming does incite violence. For instance, when you are fighting the hundred-arm beast boss and he starts using his über-attack constantly because you were kicking his ass. That has caused much screaming, gnashing of teeth and throwing of controllers. Or the situation where the game expects you to shoot every single one of those arms, which means replaying the boss fight for about a billion times, and at that point someone decides they want to chat to you. People who don't understand that talking during a manic section in a game is really not cool, truly inspire us to acts of violence. There's also the one aspect the story didn't investigate: What if the kid involved snapped because everyone was teasing him about how lousy his gaming skills were? But seriously, kids, remember that games don't make you violent; crappy level design and poor controls make you violent.

FROM: Uknights**SUBJECT:** SGS

WHERE DOES ONE START? With all the flak that SGS has been attracting lately, it's difficult to defend it. I know the old canard of "It's a free service" is getting old fast, but just imagine running *NAG* without any compensation. Sure you also get a lot of complaints about content that's not always justifiable. Just because some people are complaining doesn't mean that there's really a point in changing how the whole system works. Granted, there have been some cases in the past and also currently that are valid complaints, but the vast majority seem to be adolescent ramblings. So what if you can't swear on a server? Does that really affect you in such a big way? If that's the case, maybe you need to see someone who will help you with anger management issues. Yes, the admins take a long time to decide on some issues, but once again I point out that these people do the job out of sheer passion (in some cases ego) and cannot respond to issues immediately. Basically, what I want to bring across is that yes, there are some issues that need some attention drastically. But at the end of the day, where do you prefer to play? On a server where anything goes or on a server that has at least a bit of structure?

True, not everything can be perfect. A lot of the complaints against SGS are not really fair and just amount to the usual gamer moan. But there have been plenty of valid complaints as well. The real problem here is SGS's habit of ignoring criticism and not giving any real feedback to the various communities that make use of the free service. Just a correction: as far as we know, SGS isn't being run without compensation. It's not a free service set up by a few do-gooders. It's Telkom's baby and there are people employed for some of its aspects.

FROM: Bradley**SUBJECT:** PC Rants

FIRSTLY, I THINK YOU guys are doing an excellent job in providing SA gamers with a quality, informative magazine. I really like the Game.dev section, although I hardly know what's been said after I've read it. I have always had a massive interest in games and how they are made.

Anyway, my reason for writing is because I am so sick and tired of hearing about PCs being better than consoles and vice versa. One is not better than the other - it's all about personal preference. I for one prefer consoles. Consoles are more accessible and any game that you buy is guaranteed to work. I used to hate buying a PC game, after checking that my system matched or bettered the games requirements, only to find that it still didn't work. I'm tired of having to buy new RAM and graphics cards to play the latest releases. I'm no computer boffin either and I don't want to mess around with my PC's insides just to play. Also, what a bore having to wait for the damn thing to install and it still doesn't work!

So now I am saving for an Xbox 360. Most of the really good PC games are available for it, like *Oblivion* and *Rainbow 6: Vegas*, and they're really affordable. I don't have to worry about getting a virus or something stupid like a faulty fan causing my computer to overheat! Maybe computers hate me. I don't know, I'm over them. The PC is probably a superior machine, but I don't want to have to get a computer science degree before I can play

Crysis or something equally amazing.

So, fellow game geeks, let's just quit the platform bashing and have fun man!

Well, that's if the publisher bothered to make the game region free. Some are still bothered with NTSC and PAL, which is really annoying. Anyway, you are not hardcore enough to own a 360. Don't like messing around with your PC's insides? We already stripped our 360 and rebuilt it from scratch! Bigger fans, bigger hard drive, an 8800 GPU soldered in for good effect, and the ability to connect twenty controllers. It doesn't work, but it looks really cool.

FROM: Dawie Nienaber**SUBJECT:** PC vs. Xbox

THE CONSOLE HAS BEEN part of the gaming scene for a very long time. From the days of the Golden China right up to today's Xbox 360. Although the Xbox 360 is a phenomenal piece of hardware, I will always come back to my PC for gaming. I can upgrade my PC to play the latest games with graphics light years ahead of any console. Different consoles gave us the pleasure of different genre defining games, such as *Mortal Kombat* on the Sega Mega Drive II, *Gran Turismo* on the PSone and the incredible *Halo* on Xbox. Today, I can still play *Mortal Kombat* on my PC by using MAME. I can play *Halo* on my PC in all its splendour. This is where each and every console still falls short.

Consoles are specific hardware, made for playing specific games. I cannot take my

At the end of the day, where do you prefer to play? On a server where anything goes or on a server that has at least a bit of structure?

ON THE FORUM

QUESTION: Are you ready for the PS3? Do you plan to get it?

Infinitely_Blue: I will be getting a PS3 come launch day, but not because I am a fanboy. Rather, I am curious to see the differences between the 360 and the PS3, not to mention that I have seen a few movies on Blu-ray while in London and I'm keen to get a player. So with this in mind, why not get the PS3, which has Blu-ray as standard, instead of paying a couple of thousand just for the player. At least I can get some good gaming out of it as well.

Boggle24: If it had been a nice clean R4,000, it could be sitting next to its beloved older brother in my living room, come launch day. So, no, I don't plan on getting it, but *FXIII* and a sane price drop could very well change my mind.

Vexo: Yea, I am definitely planning on getting one. I have always enjoyed the exclusive titles for the PS2, like *Metal Gear Solid* and of course *Final Fantasy*. The question is not if I am going to get one or not. The question is when I will get one. The Sony PlayStation 3 60GB Premium Version is going for R6,299 at Take 2. When it launches in SA, the price will probably drop. I will get one straight away or wait for the price to drop a bit.

Mr_Wes: I want one, but I cannot afford it.

Gammaray: Yes I'm ready - got my HDTV last weekend ... can't wait.

Brazed: Ready? What am I supposed to get ready for? A slick 'little' black number that will make anyone who might see it go 'ooh' and 'ah'. No thanks. Overpriced, overhyped, the PS3 doesn't seem worth it. Granted, I only recently became the owner of a console, but no one has given me a less-than-limp reason for getting a PS3.

Onana: I don't plan on buying one. It simply doesn't offer enough to justify buying it when I already have a 360. I usually like Sony's products and have a PS2 and a PSP, but frankly, the PS3 has been disappointing.

Pfangirl: I'd love to see the PS3 in action, but I'm definitely not buying one anytime soon. What I am doing instead is stocking up on good to excellent PS2 games, now that their prices have dropped dramatically.

CaptainCrunch: The price point of the console and games is just too expensive for me, a predominantly casual PC gamer [maybe my opinion is moot then] with limited time/cash... If I were to adopt console gaming, it would be the X360 - not the PS3. Until then, I'll have to stick to my overpriced PC entertainment system.

Have your say on the NAG forums: <http://forums.tidemedia.co.za/>

I love strategy and I am a devoted fan of the C&C games and all things strategy, but nothing has changed from building a base and training a horde of units to destroy your enemy's base.

Xbox 360 to a LAN, plug it into the network and expect to frag some players in a session of *Counter-Strike* or do a co-op mission in *Ghost Recon*.

Finally, I'd like to comment on what Ralph Viktor said in February's NAG, and I quote: "The PC is dead as a gaming tool. Long live the Xbox!" The only thing the Xbox was ever good for was *Halo*. Remind me to send Fatal1ty this message and remind him it's time to swap all his gaming peripherals for an Xbox.

Well, you can connect two 360s on a LAN if the game supports system link. Ask your 360-owning buddies if they are having fun in Crackdown. But you make a valid point, especially with MAME and the countless arcade classics it supports. That said, you don't need an 8800 to run MAME, but you'll have to consider something like that if you want to play Crysis in all of its glory. One could also argue that the MAME games didn't come to exist on the PC first, but they're arcade. And no one is willing to argue Arcade vs. Anything - because you all should love and worship arcade machines.

FROM: Jack man

SUBJECT: Consoles ARE PCs!

MANY INTERNET ARTICLES LATELY stated that the PC is on the way out for gaming. What they all fail to see is the similarities. I mean, what makes a console a console: it has a CPU, a GPU and RAM. What is a console? A console is a PC that can only play games! You can even plug a keyboard and a mouse in it. You even have to upgrade your console these days. So, in an indirect way a PC can also be seen as a console. The real difference between these platforms is their games. You buy the platform that has your favourite games, and that's it.

Yeah, well, a Boeing has an engine and uses oil and my car has an engine and uses oil. But we've never stumbled out of a bar drunk and tried to get into the aircraft instead of our own somewhat smaller vehicles. So, basically what you are saying is that ANYTHING with a CPU and GPU is a PC. Sure, why not. If Bleem was still around, you could have proven it to us as well.

FROM: Terence Nieuwoudt

SUBJECT: Wired or Wireless?

AS ALWAYS, THANKS FOR a great gaming magazine. However, I do have one question I would like answered, but, as stated in an earlier issue of NAG, the friendship between NAG fans and the magazine itself is purely platonic! So not all the questions and e-mails can be answered. In your December 2006 issue, in the review of *Dead Rising*, you stated that a person "may regret they have the wireless (Xbox 360) controller, which is now outside in the bushes." Is the Xbox 360 controller not a good gaming device? Would I be better off having wired controllers? I would really appreciate some feedback on this. I personally view you guys as the "Ghost Recon Team" of the gaming world.

Yes, yes we are. In fact, we're so good at not being seen at work that we prefer being called the Splinter Cells of the gaming world [except when the editor starts rambling, then we become the Metal Gear Solid of the gaming world]. There was an attempt at being the God of War of the gaming world, but... loincloths... But our ultimate goal is to become The Sims of the gaming world: to do very little, but everyone thinks we're busy with really big things, especially when we set things on fire. Nah, you can buy a wireless controller. Buy two! Miktar meant that at times Dead Rising would frustrate you and a wired controller is at least attached to something (though that breakaway section is very effective). But there's nothing wrong with the wireless controllers - just plan to get Play Charge kits as well.

FROM: Pierre Ferreira

SUBJECT: Strategic realism

GAMES HAVE ADVANCED SO dramatically not only in terms of graphics, but in the way we play. From destroying the big red dot with your blue dot too the more movie-like games with a plot like *F.E.A.R.*, for example. But what advancements did strategy games in particular make. In my opinion NONE!

I love strategy and I am a devoted fan of the C&C games and all things strategy, but nothing has changed from building a base and training a horde of units to destroy your enemy's base. Yes, you as player can use your own strategies, but there is just no depth.

As a gamer, I want something more realistic. Is this not what game developers are trying to achieve, to make games more realistic? Somehow strategy was left behind.

What happens when an enemy compound has to be taken out in real life? A plan of attack is formulated from what intelligence is provided by scouts, spy planes, and satellites, to determine the enemy's strengths and weaknesses, and to ensure minimal loss of life. This should be incorporated into games.

If this could be used before a game is started on a map of the area, you could choose an infiltration point and safe extraction for your units and more. When in-game while playing, changes could be made as the situation changes. The game experience would be limited only to the strategic mind of the player, much like Ubisoft's *Ghost Recon Advanced Warfighter*.

Yeah, maybe, but then we'd also have to listen to strategy fans constantly debating Sun Tzu's Art of War, even though no one had actually read anything more than a summary in a Hallmark card. That, and then strategy games will be less about making tanks and more about starving the other guy by rounding up all the local villagers and putting them in charge of making bullets. We also want more realism. For example, don't game characters ever stub their toes or drop their weapons in the middle of a boss fight? And this whole business of the enemy always leaving you ammo - it's no wonder they lose!

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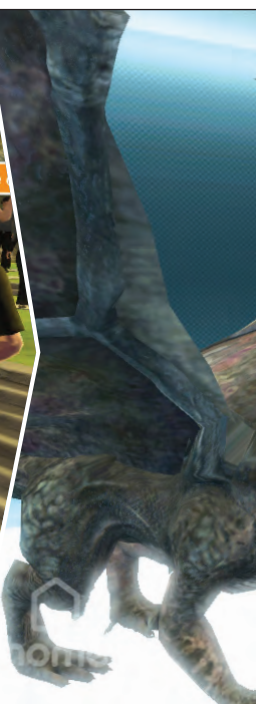
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"EAST, WEST, HOME'S BEST"

SONY ANNOUNCES NEW ONLINE VIRTUAL COMMUNITY FOR PS3

SO RECKONS SONY ANYWAY, as the next-gen console wars move to a new battlefield: online. During his keynote speech at the Game Developers Conference in San Francisco, Phil Harrison, president of Sony's game division, announced the company's latest scheme, PlayStation Home, to riotous applause. Somewhere between Second Life, Xbox Live and Nintendo's Animal Crossing, Home is a sophisticated real-time 3D online meta-verse, with heavy emphasis on user communication and interactivity.

"While the 3D graphics demonstrate the power of PlayStation 3 and the PlayStation Network" says Sony corporate executive and chief software technology officer, Izumi Kawanishi, "the most impressive feature in Home is the variety of ways in which multiple consumers, as well as our third-party partners, can experience the next generation of communication by interacting and sharing among each other."

Users are assigned a unique persistent identity and an extremely detailed and highly customisable avatar, as well as a basic private apartment in the virtual world where they can invite and hang out with other avatars - something like *The Sims*, but without the grilled cheese sandwiches and desperate fights for the toilet. Apartments are also customisable, with all sorts of

funky furniture and décor to choose from. This space can be further personalised with user-created content: snap a picture of your best pal surreptitiously picking his nose, pop the memory stick into your console, upload the picture to a frame on your virtual apartment wall and share it with the whole world. There will also be larger apartments available for purchase, with additional downloadable content.

Home also features public spaces, such as leisure areas with bowling alleys, pool tables, and arcade cabinets (possibly hinting at a feature like Xbox Live Arcade), as well as game company-sponsored zones where you can play demos of their latest and upcoming releases. For the dedicated gamer, there's a Hall of Fame for trophies unlocked and awarded in-game. Throughout the world, users will be able to communicate with one another via text, audio and video chat and an impressive array of emotes.

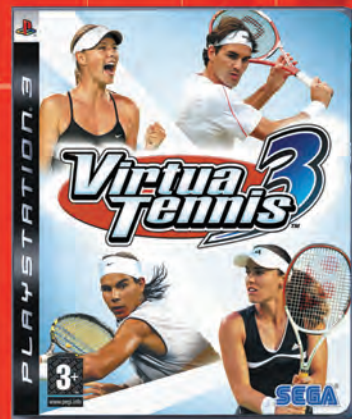
The game goes Beta in April, with a launch scheduled for September, when it will be a free download available from the PlayStation store. "I feel strongly that this unique blend of community, user-generated content, collaboration and commerce will expand the future of computer entertainment," says Kawanishi. And he's almost certainly right. Say what you want about the PS3, but Home sounds awesome.





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SNIPPETS

YOUR ESSENTIAL INFO, NOW IN BITE-SIZED PORTIONS!



Australian gamers have started campaigning for an official **R** classification when it comes to game age ratings. An article on the blog of Aussie newspaper *The Age* said that "[...]the lack of an R classification sends the wrong message to the non-game playing community, perpetuating the dangerous myth that games are only played by children and all games are suitable for minors."



A co-founder of **Killzone** (and "cough" Shellshock) has created a new non-profit publisher, supposedly the industry's first. Called **OneBigGame**, it will support charitable causes and apparently already has attracted the attention of some industry veterans.



Asphalt Urban GT 3, *Street Rules*, *Brothers in Arms: Hell's Highway*, *Midnight Pool*, *Brain Challenge* and *FIFA 2008* – these are a few of the games heading to the new **N-Gage**. Nokia also breathed new life into the platform when it announced a new version as well as upgraded development tools. The new N-Gage is more geared towards the booming mobile games market.

US console software sales in January were up 57% from last period, thanks to the next-generation platforms leading the charge. Everyone expected a smaller raise than that, but even if you take the extra week in January as a consideration, it's still 22% higher than last year, amassing sales of around \$549 million.



GAMES MAKE YOU DRIVE FASTER

RECENT STUDIES HAVE SHOWN that driving simulation games increase a gamer's speed on the real roads. Although this has caused great controversy, is this actually an accurate representation of games? The studies that were held failed to include many other aspects that prove that it's not accurate. It was stated that 27% of people between the ages of 16 to 24 who were interviewed said that they had become dangerous drivers after playing driving games.

However, if one looks at these statistics compared to those of people who have not played driving sims, they are quite similar. The only difference is that the former group has made a scapegoat out of games. What they failed to mention is that during other studies it was proven that time spent with a sim actually improved one's reflexes and coordination, thus improving your driving skills. Even other forms of vehicles like airplanes use simulators to first train their pilots before they are allowed to fly.

Another aspect that has not been taken into account is the movies. When *Fast and Furious* was released, statistics showed that driving accidents increased dramatically for a short period of time. Other surveys have also pointed to music and a person's state of mind while they are driving. The only difference between those studies and these involving games is that the gaming industry provides the perfect scapegoat due to the amount of criticism that the industry takes. It also goes to show how gullible people are to what so-called scientists say, and how little they actually understand about gaming in general. It is also a proven fact, although not widely known, that gaming actually helps develop brain activity as well as speeding up reaction time, not to mention the educational aspects that some games offer. Too much is left out for these studies to actually be accurate.

This just goes to show: recent studies have shown that studies are disturbing.

THE PLAYSTATION 2 HOLDS ITS OWN

TAKE A MINUTE BEFORE you start signing the PS2's swansong. The behemoth console is not only the best-selling console ever, but it also clearly refuses to go quietly in the light of the next-generation consoles on the market. In fact, it clearly doesn't seem interested in even languishing in their shadows. Sony posted great sales for January, but most of that action came from the PS2, which at over 300,000 units, was only beaten by the Wii, which sold 436,000 units (ahead of the 360 and PS3, which sold 294,000 and 244,000 units respectively). On top of that, the console isn't losing on the games front either: *God of War 2*, which retails for \$50 a copy, shipped over 1.1 million units. Analysts point to the lower price point and the large library of over 2,000 games as major attraction points. Sure, it can't output to HD, but it is less than half what a next-gen machine would cost you.

"Some who spend \$129 on the PS2 isn't going to the store to drop \$600 on the PS3," P.J. McNealy of American Technology told Reuters: "It's a bit of a catch-22 for them right now. You want to give a reason for people to migrate to the PS3."



BLUE DRAGON JAPAN CRACKDOWN

KNOwn AS **RIOT ACT** in Japan, action-blast *Crackdown* for the Xbox 360 managed to crack into the top 30 game sales charts last month, debuting at a respectable 21. Nintendo still dominates the rising sun sales charts, taking an 80 percent share of sales in the top ten game titles. Sony's PlayStation 3 hasn't managed to enter the top 30 until the recent release of *Gundam*.

Staying in the East, rather popular JRP *Blue Dragon* for the 360 remains a success in Japan with over 150,000 units sold already, making it Microsoft's most successful release in Japan. To keep the ball rolling, *Blue Dragon* will also be getting its own anime series, and Hironobu Sakaguchi (*Final Fantasy* creator), Nobuo Uematsu (*Final Fantasy* music composer) and Akira Toriyama (*Dragon Ball* creator) are all said to be involved. An order has been placed for 52 episodes and director Yukihiro Matsushita (*Getbackers*, *Gakuen Alice*, *Hunter X Hunter: Greed Island*) will be behind the wheel.

A manga, *Blue Dragon Rai Grado*, has already started appearing in the popular *Weekly Jump* magazine in Japan with the creator of *Death Note* in charge of it. The manga apparently has a very different visual style to that of the game, and elaborates more on the background of the characters.



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MORE AND MORE GOD OF WAR

EVERYBODY'S FAVOURITE TATTOOED BARBARIAN will be following his ordained warpath onto PS3 and PSP, according to a recent announcement by Ready At Dawn developer Cory Barlog. Speculation has been rife for some time now, following a mysterious teaser on the company's Website that showed an image from *Daxter* being drenched in blood, and branded with 'Coming Soon' in a hauntingly familiar font. This was confirmed at the March *God of War II* launch event, with Barlog promising something "epic".

Grand news for PSP owners is that the *Ghost of Sparta's* first portable foray will be a brand new gorefest elaborating on the backstory behind the first and second games. "We're not going to do a port," assured Barlog. "We're not reusing any levels. It's all original content. This is going to be an all new adventure that ties into the overarching story. My big strategy for this entire franchise is that there's never going to be some

solo, separated thing. Everything's going to deal with the overall plot."

Meanwhile, a future next-gen iteration on PS3 is most definitely on the cards, to include 1,080p visuals as well as SIXAXIS support with rumble functions. Rumble functions? Since Sony has only recently inked a deal with Immersion for future controller technologies, Barlog evidently knows something we don't.

An avowed fan of Epic's *Gears of War*, Barlog is also considering some co-op action, although he'd rather it were a fully-integrated feature of the game instead of a tacked-on afterthought. "Does co-op have a place in *God of War*? I'm thinking how can we incorporate this without damaging what happens in the game, without having it feel silly," he said.

Perhaps somewhat ominous, however, is the confirmation that a *God of War* script has been completed, with a film heading into development. Hopefully nobody will tell Uwe Boll.

POP, MGS AND SILENT HILL 2 MOVIES!

GAMES BASED ON MOVIES have always been popular, but the reverse is starting to take off as well. Recently, it was discovered that Sony is in talks with Konami to produce a movie based on the popular game franchise, *Metal Gear Solid*. This will be quite a feat considering the total time span covered in Snake's life. It will definitely be a good plot for a movie and could rival the likes of *Mission Impossible*. We'll just have to wait and see. *MGS* is not the only game in to be made into a movie at the moment. Ubisoft is also keen to develop either a feature-length movie or a short film based on its *Prince of Persia* franchise, whereas the creators of *Silent Hill* are in talks to make a sequel movie. It is still unclear whether or not this sequel will be based on the game sequel, or if it will follow a different plot. Whatever the case may be, the future of gaming related movies looks bright with many more prospects still out there.



THE WARIOS

+N IS A NINTENDO FANBOY magazine that recently hit shelves in Sweden. However, who cares if they're fanboys - just look at the stunning cover of their latest issue. Editor of +N, Oskar Skog, mentioned that he wanted to see a return to the days of custom artwork for gaming magazine covers, so he commissioned this piece based on the cover of *The Warriors*. We wouldn't want to mess with the Luigis or the Pikachus.



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Somewhere a religious group managed to rub its two collective brain cells together and figure out that the **Wii** can go on the Internet and that the Internet has **porn**. They also figured out that there are probably sweaty naked people sitting on their couches browsing porn on the Wii. This has prompted Website The Porn Talk to release word of this problem, calling it the Wii's dirty little secret. Yes, parents, the Wii and the PS3 can connect to the Net. So can cellphones. And that's the same Web where porn stays. You do the math.



From the demise of Clover Studio comes **Seeds**: a developer apparently comprised of some of Capcom's top talent. That includes a lot of the Clover guys, but a few others as well. Incidentally, it appears the *Okami* crew also worked on big names like *Resident Evil 4* and *Shadow of the Colossus*. These are all at Seeds now. Unfortunately not enough people bought *Okami*, so will Seeds' games make money?

In 2002 Japanese developer **Alicesoft** released the erotic computer game *Tsumamigui* (apparently it's a word play on "wife" and "secretly eating") and it was incredibly popular. It's been a few years since then, but the game clearly made an impression in the right circles, because Alicesoft recently gave its blessing for a hardcore porn movie to be made that is based on the game. That's right, a porn movie based on an erotic game. Uwe Boll is not said to be involved.



GAME ENGINE LICENCE BONANZA

THIS IS THE ULTIMATE showdown of ultimate next-gen game engines. First into the ring is Epic Games' vaunted Unreal Engine 3, currently licensed by bigwig publishers like Capcom, Activision, and Square Enix. "The Unreal Engine is one of the most powerful and versatile tools available for next-generation game development," declared Mark Beaumont, executive VP for Capcom, while Activision defended its choice as "one of the most technically advanced engines on the market. The engine's robust suite of programming tools will enable our development team to deliver what is sure to be an amazing game experience."

Avatar Reality, meanwhile, has become the first company to snap up Crytek's CryENGINE

2, for a sci-fi MMO set on a terra-formed Mars. "CryENGINE 2 is able to render the most beautiful images in real time that I've ever seen in my 20 years in the computer graphics industry," said Kazuyuki Hashimoto, Avatar Reality's president. "After viewing the images, there is no question that CryENGINE 2 is the perfect engine for us to use to build our massively multiplayer virtual world."

Finally, GarageGames is set for the commercial release of its low-cost Torque Game Engine Advanced, aimed primarily at indie and budget-conscious developers. The engine features all the bells and whistles you'd expect, including procedural shaders, multi-pass texturing and lighting, water renderers, and a rugged physics model.

CRYSIS WILL RUN ON OLDER RIGS

GAMERS OF OLD AND gamers anew will be happy to know that the upcoming title by Crytek, *Crysis*, will be able to run on machines as old as three years. CEO of Crytek, Cevat Yerli, stated during a recent press conference that all the effects produced in the game would be scalable depending on the hardware of a player's computer. He also said that the game would run extremely well on DirectX 10 and that if a player cannot play with this version, they must rather avoid seeing it in its full glory because they will become disheartened with the DirectX 9 version's graphics. This is good news all-round for gamers, but one

must wonder why he made the comments on graphics. Will the graphics be so superior on DX10 that all who see it will be disgusted with their DX9 versions? This might just drastically increase the sale of said cards, or at the very least put pressure on companies to release cheaper cards to appease the public.

This will probably be their one and only title to use both graphics generations before switching over fully to DX10. Yerli has already said that Crytek is busy changing all systems over to Vista and DX10. Now we just have to wait for that special day when *Crysis* will actually BE launched so that we can judge for ourselves.



SIXAXIS TO RUMBLE AFTER ALL?

SONY STILL CAN'T MAKE up its mind about rumble vs. SIXAXIS. When it came to defending its choice of omitting rumble in the PS3 controller, Sony was adamant that it would interfere with the SIXAXIS' motion-sensing doodads, and its omission had nothing to do with rumble-technology company Immersion suing their asses off for patent infringement. A Canadian company, SplitFish, told Sony that it could easily get rumble into the PS3 controller easy, but Sony didn't want to hear it. "We have had no contact with this company and continue to have no plans to include FF [force feedback] in SIXAXIS," a representative affirmed. Later, Sony president of worldwide studios Phil Harrison even went so far as to say that rumble is just so last-year. "I believe that the SIXAXIS controller offers game designers and developers far more opportunity for future innovation than rumble ever did. Now, rumble I think was the last generation feature; it's not the next-generation feature. I think motion sensitivity is. And we don't see the need to do that."

Now that Sony has settled with Immersion for a cool \$97 million, rumours are strong that we might see rumble on the PS3 controller in the near future. This would suit *Oblivion* developers Bethesda just fine, as Peter Hines of Bethesda would much prefer rumble. "I think that its [SIXAXIS] value depends upon the game. It didn't make sense on *Oblivion* but I'm sure there are some games it does make sense on. To be honest I would rather have the rumble instead of the SIXAXIS motion stuff."

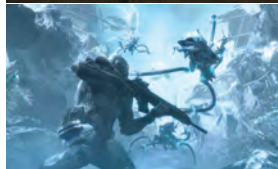
No confirmation yet on a SIXAXIS controller with rumble and it may be several months before anything solid materialises.





MOVERS & SHAKERS

OOOH, WE SUDDENLY WANT a PS3. Why? Because the possible PS3 'killer app' has arrived: **LittleBigPlanet!** Demonstrated at GDC, the game is only due in 2008, but looks like co-op heaven and includes the most versatile level editor we've seen yet – and it also happens to support multiple players. But that's still a way off. Closer to now is the release of dragon-sim **Lair** on the PS3. The game is looking unbelievable and if you'll be the owner of a PS3 a few months from now, you might be able to get it. According to Factor 5, the game is 90% done, but that pesky 'polish and optimising' 10% remains. That could take a while and no one has put a final date down yet. Meanwhile, Tecmo has said that the upcoming **Ninja Gaiden Sigma** will remain a PS3 exclusive with no love for 360 fans. It's a shift in the sands considering how much Team Ninja loves the 360 at the moment. Then again, that developer has always been known for loving the best hardware out there – and this time it's the PS3. But both consoles' owners can look forward to a former PC exclusive. The mighty **Quake Wars** will be appearing on the two machines as well. Announced by id Software, the additional two developments will be handled by Nerve on the 360 and Z-Axis on the PS3. Both versions will include persistent characters and online stat tracking, as well as a focus on team play. Now, if Microsoft was smart, it would be over this like butter on bread, because if Quake Wars supported the Live Anywhere initiative – where PC and 360 games can play against each other – it would be a lot easier to convince PC gamers that a Gold account is worth it. Microsoft managed to get another big title for its platforms, though. **Alan Wake**, the game that nobody was talking about until the Intel Quad-Core demonstration (and now everyone wants, even though most people can't tell you what kind of a game it is), has been confirmed as a 360 and Vista exclusive. Yeah, that means that PS3 and XP owners have to sit on the bench for this one. Meanwhile, the elusive **Crysis** is still "definitely" not coming to any consoles. That's the word from EA after some of Crytek's staff said a new 360 version of Crysis is being worked on. Apparently it was all a miscommunication. Speaking of publishers, who remembers **Gathering of Developers**, better known as GOD Games? The founders of that outfit have resurfaced in the industry with their new publisher, Gamecock. Apart from giving tons of online blogs the opportunity to weave some rather terrible innuendos and double-intentions into their headlines, the team also already signed on five new games: a PC MMO called **Fury**, due later this year; a handheld and PC noir game about bugs called **Insecticide**; **Mushroom Men**, a next-gen game about mushrooms having a civil war slated for 2008; **Stubbs the Zombie** developer Wideload's new game **Hail to the Chimp** for next-gens in 2008; and **Hero**, a comedic dungeon crawler due for PC and next-gens next year. In closing, two more bits of PC news! Funcom has announced that **The Longest Journey** will continue, using episodic released. The company also secured funding for **Dreamfall Chapters**. Finally, the indie casual game Wonderland has a fourth chapter called **Wonderland Adventures**. Take a look at the demo at www.midnightsynergy.com/adventures.



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Mark Rein told *Wired* that "We spent less than \$10 million to make *Gears of War*. Somewhere between \$9 and 10 million." In other words, the same as *Lost Planet*, though Rein sees this as an example that next-gen games can be cheap \$10 million is cheap? My, things really have changed.



If you live in the States, you can sign up for the **360 Reward Program**. Members will get freebies based on their gamer score. The smallest reward is a dashboard theme and *Contra* on XBLA. The top reward is all that, a T-shirt, *Fusion Frenzy 2* [ack!] and 200 points. More at www.xbox.com/rewards, but we don't qualify.



Shane Kim, corporate vice president for **Microsoft Game Studios**, told *1Up* that *Viva Piñata* on the DS makes sense. That means that Microsoft might be looking beyond its own console platforms and not introduces a handheld of its own. It also means *Viva Piñata* might come to the DS!



The **ESRB** has started looking for full-time raters as part of efforts to fight criticism that the ratings body is not doing a proper job. According to ESRB president Patricia Vance the raters will start their jobs in April. At the same time the senator of Kansas has relaunched a bid to get his **Truth in Video Game Act** made a law in the US.

Acclaim, the free-to-play MMO publisher that relies on micro-transactions for its revenue, has notched up a nice 1,000,000 subscribers in its first year. "I would like to thank all of our fans and players who have made this amazing milestone possible", said Howard Marks, CEO Acclaim Games Inc. The company came to the world's attention when it took over the name of the now-defunct publisher Acclaim.

IV

GTA IV EPISODIC 'TOO BIG' FOR PS3 ALONE

BY THE TIME YOU read this, the much-hyped *Grand Theft Auto IV* trailer will have been released and we all might have a bit more of a clue on what to expect from the next iteration in this legendary series. No pressure, Rockstar, but make sure it's awesome. While we wait for that, *Take 2* has revealed that the game will make use of episodic content. In a recent financial report, the company reveals that this content will start becoming available in 2008, but no more details were given. What we do know, though, is that the game is costing quite a lot to make. While chatting to bloggers at GDC

recently, Sony's Phil Harrison was asked about losing *GTA's* exclusivity and if that would affect the PS3. He said it wouldn't, saying that the new EDGE development tools would see more exclusives. However, he also said that *GTA IV* was simply too big for the PS3 install base.

"I don't think PS3 has the install base to support Rockstar's investment in *GTA IV* on its own," he said. Does that mean *GTA IV* doesn't use EDGE? Probably, but good news is that the game has signed LucasArts' Euphoria technology – you know, the physics system that lets you throw people through doors. Neat.



WEIRD CREATURE OVERLOAD: MORE VIVA PIÑATA AND LOCOROCO

RARE ANNOUNCED AT THE GDC that it would be trotting out more *Viva Piñata* fun, saying that, "We're pleased with the overall support that it's got and there's more to come within that franchise." Despite meagre sales, the game garnered critical acclaim, and an animated series was recently launched in the US and UK.

"It's a two- or three-year push," said Lee Schuneman, production head at Rare, about the expanding franchise, "and if after that it's a terrible failure then we'll say fair enough."

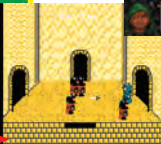
Phil Harrison, meanwhile, had attending journalists in a speculative tizz while demonstrating Sony's new Home service: lurking inside the Hall of Fame was an achievement trophy for PSP puzzle platformer *LocoRoco*. While Sony has maintained an infuriating silence on the issue, Harrison recently bragged about having had a spin on "LocoRoco's next version." In a subsequent lecture segment, *LocoRoco* director, Tsutomu Kuono, described his vision for an allegedly hypothetical sequel, featuring enhanced AI, visuals, and controls, concluding, "I can't elaborate any further, but you can probably guess what all that means."

THE EVOLUTION OF: HACK 'N SLASH



Advanced Dungeons & Dragons (1982)

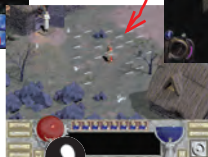
Deadly Towers (1986)



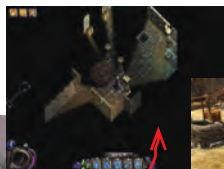
The Summoning (1992)



Diablo (1996)



Nox (2000)



Titan Quest (2006)

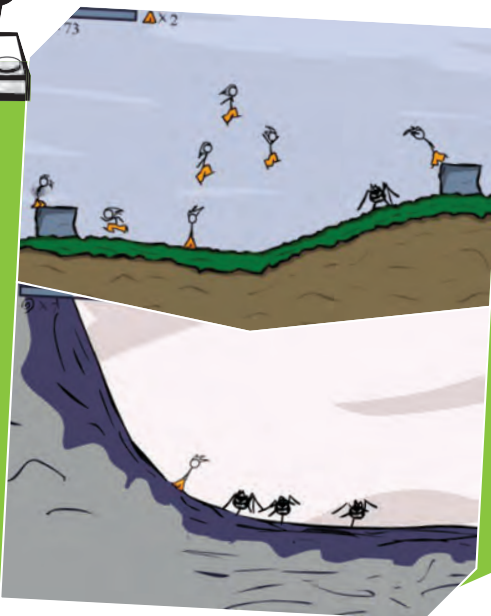


FREE GAME OF THE MONTH

FANCYPANTS ADVENTURES

[www.fancypantsadventures.com]

PART MARIO AND PART Sonic, *Fancypants Adventures* is a whimsical Flash platformer with some seriously smooth moves. Currently, only 'World 1' has been released, but in it, you can already get a feel for the game and its style. You can hunt and grab trophies to collect while exploring the simplistic, yet vivid environments. What makes *Fancypants* so interesting is how the author approaches the fast platforming style of *Sonic*-style games, but with added flair. When you hit the lip of a ramp, *Fancypants* will actually do a smooth back flip and transition to the next ramp leading down. You can wall jump easily up narrow spaces and roll to hit incoming enemies if you're moving too fast to jump Mario-style. The author has released a demo of 'World 2' already, which you can find at (www.kongregate.com/games/DrNeroCF/the-fancy-pants-adventure-world-2-demo). It contains a whole bunch of new things for you to try out and explore. *Fancypants* is a good example of how an older genre can be given new life, not through technological advancements, but just some stylish rethinking.





RICHARD BRANSON TO 'VIRGINISE' PC DISTRIBUTION

HAVING BECOME BORED OF CD stores, airplanes, cellphones, bottled Cola and galactic travel, British entrepreneur-extraordinaire, Sir Richard Branson, has unveiled his plans for a new online game distribution company. Hooking up with Game Domain International, Virgin is set to launch *A World of My Own* later this year.

Somewhat sparingly described as a "3D virtual world," we can only imagine that this service will resemble some sort of monstrous hybrid of *Second Life* and *Steam*. According to early reports, it's a virtual island of clubs, restaurants, seaside apartments, and designer clothing shops. Branson, meanwhile, is all

a-flutter with excitement, declaring that this is "the opportunity to do for PC games what iTunes has done for music. The GDI technology will revolutionise how the mass-market will play games, and will give them more choice for less money."

UK-based publisher Koch Media (X3: Reunion, *Warhammer: Mark of Chaos*) has already signed up, while other publishers are looking on with a speculative eyeball. The promised GDI technology, according to Branson, "boasts a much-improved download speed, allowing gamers to play only minutes after starting a download."



ARE YOU A LEGEND? HAVE A MASTER CHIEF HELMET!

HALO 3 IS NOT far off and its fans certainly cannot wait any longer for the game to arrive. So obviously Microsoft and Bungie need to find a way to bring more *Halo* goodness to those people and more of their money to *Halo*. Thus enter the *Halo 3 Legendary Edition*. No price has been announced yet, but consider that the *Halo 2 Special Edition* with 2 discs retailed

for \$69.99. In the *Legendary edition of Halo 3* you'll get the game and three additional discs with everything from *Making Of* documentaries to a look at how fans have extended the *Halo* universe. On top of that you get a small Master Chief helmet that will house your four discs and proclaim to the world how legendary you are/*Halo* is.

Enter Pimp City - Where Bling Is King & Speed Is Everything!

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Do you recall the story about the professional baseball player who hurt his arm playing *Guitar Hero*? You'd think he'd quit, but Detroit Tigers reliever **Joel Zumaya** loves the game too much. "A lot of people have criticised me and told me, 'Joel, put it away.' But I'm still going to play it. Just not as often." His story even netted him some free *Guitar Hero* stuff, thanks to the free publicity he gave it.



Both **THQ** and **Ubisoft** have put it on the record that they plan to create more games based on original IPs. THQ's chief financial officer said the company would like to get more revenue from internally-developed projects instead of relying as much on licenses, such as the WWE brand. But some of these include bringing back older games, like *Red Faction*. Meanwhile, Ubisoft said it plans to develop three new IPs every three years. Nice!



Okami's director, **Hideki Kamiya**, echoed our sentiments when he complained about *Twilight Princess*' bland visuals. According to him, the new *Zelda* game lacks that visual flair that we loved in *Wind Waker* and was a clear inspiration for how *Okami* turned out. "I'm a *Zelda* freak," he said, "it's no overstatement to say that I created *Okami* because of *Zelda*. I really wanted [*Twilight Princess*] to have that regal aura, because *Zelda* was what we were aspiring to..."

Microsoft has officially relaxed **Xbox Live Arcade** size limitation from 50MB to 150MB. That confirms the plans Microsoft were rumoured to have since the *Castlevania* game heading to XBLA was reported to need more space than a mere 50MB.



LIVE FOR PC ANNOUNCED

260,000 YEARS OF GAMING. Do you think this is possible? It has already been achieved according to Microsoft. In a recent press release, they stated that over six million gamers have subscribed to the Live service. This has increased network activity and the total clocked amount of gaming hours recorded has reached 2.3 billion. This equates to 260,000 years of gaming already played.

This has spurred Microsoft on to bring the Live service to other platforms, and in May they hope to launch Live for PCs as well. This will bring together over 200 million gamers worldwide to compete against each other and their Xbox 360 counterparts. The service is said to be launching on the same day

that *Halo 2* for Vista will launch. The profits that will be generated through this will be astronomical, if you look at the prices offered. A Gold membership only costs \$50 for a year's subscription. However, multiply that by the 200 million potential subscribers and you are looking at amounts in the billions. The one main difference between the two platforms is that on Windows, people with a Silver membership can still compete against other PC players.

Only certain games will be able to play across platforms, and the first title announced so far for this is the upcoming *Shadowrun*, an FPS title that will be released in June this year. It is a whole new world out there for gamers and Microsoft is showing the way.



VALVE QUESTIONS GAMES FOR WINDOWS VALIDITY

HALF-LIFE 2 DEVELOPER VALVE is totally hot for DirectX 10. Recently, marketing manager Doug Lombardi confirmed that *Episode Two* and *Team Fortress 2* would both support the advanced stuff introduced in Vista's DirectX 10. These will also scale down to DirectX 8 for those not yet willing to buy into the next Microsoft OS.

On the flip side, Valve seems less enthusiastic about Microsoft's Games For Windows initiative, which tries to standardise game features such as widescreen support and proper interfacing with Vista's Games Explorer. "Right now it seems like it's part of the marketing push to help Vista," commented Lombardi.

He goes on to say that the PC gaming market really isn't as weak as it's made out to be. "Sony and Microsoft both have armies of PR people. All those people do is say the PC's dying, the console's winning, and nobody on the PC side is championing that platform. And sales data tracks retail, and there's no doubt about it, PC sales at retail are declining."

Lombardi points out that, "World of Warcraft is making a whole lot of money outside of the retail channel; we're making a decent bit of cash off Steam, all the casual guys are not tracked - the PopCap games, *Bejewelled*, all that stuff doesn't show up."

FREE MOD OF THE MONTH

COMMANDER DOOM [DOOM 3]

[dungeondoom.d3files.com/commander_doom/]

SELF-DESCRIBED AS A "SINGLE-PLAYER, first-person action, real-time strategy game for *Doom 3*", *Commander Doom* is probably the most interesting mod for *Doom 3* yet. Using all sorts of modding magic, *Commander Doom* lets you control demonic hellspawn directly, moving them around in an RTS style interface to cover your flanks and help you take on the mounting odds against you. You can tell your units to attack, capture points or use their own judgement. Using credits gained from capturing resource points, you can upgrade your technology and summon more advanced units to help you in the fight. There are four maps to choose from and each one represents a different set of challenges. The way you can control your units, research technology or even get a Picture in Picture view of whatever unit you have selected on the Tactical Screen is seriously impressive. It seems there are no plans for a multiplayer version just yet, but we're hoping the mod author makes an MP version soon, since we're quite eager to attack each other with hordes of demonic hellspawn. *Doom 3* lacks quality mods, and it certainly doesn't have the quantity that *Quake* managed to gather for itself. Perhaps the era of modding is slowly fading away.





CONSOLE WATCH

IT'S A VERY PLAYSTATION 3 month it seems, with Sony's next-generation console appearing everywhere gaming news can be found (especially after the announcements of *LittleBigPlanet* and *Home for the PS3*). Hold on to your hats, this is going to be a roller-coaster ride down console news.

Sony is planning on cutting costs on the PS3, especially in manufacturing. Sony Senior VP Takao Yuhara talked about shrinking primary silicon, removing tertiary silicon and then mumbled something about the PS3 enjoying a cascading cost-reduction effect. The cost of the chips will go down, as well as costs associated with the motherboard, cooling and power supply. This has no effect (yet) on what the PS3 will cost consumers, just that Sony won't lose as much money per console sold. Sony confirmed that the PS3 would see no pricecuts for at least two years. On the retail side of things, Play.com announced that the PS3 is their "most pre-ordered console yet". Sony chimed in to say that "retailer feedback has been overwhelmingly positive. Woolworths, Amazon and Play, to name a few, are reporting record breaking pre-orders and an overwhelming demand for PS3". Phil Harrison from Sony has started dropping hints about downloadable TV content for the PS3, saying "I think PlayStation 3 needs to stand for gaming and digital entertainment in the living room pushing the envelope of high definition, pushing the envelope of broadband, and of course that includes more than just games".

Regardless, Sony is happy with PS3 January sales included in the \$550 million in revenue for the PlayStation brand in North America alone. Jack Tretton, CEO of SCEA, affirmed that Sony will ship 2 million PS3 units throughout North America by the end of March. A new set of development tools for the PS3, titled 'PlayStation 3 Edge', should keep developers happy and make PS3 development easier.

The PSP is getting its own global network according to Sony, letting you stream content from your PS3 from anywhere in the world (via Wi-Fi). More good news for the PSP includes a new-found way for hackers to unlock PSPs for running homebrew code. Using this new flaw, they can apparently unlock all PSPs regardless of age or firmware version. Sony isn't happy, of course. "The problem experienced here is not with homebrew applications, but with hackers who pirate commercial titles," a Sony spokesperson said.

Financial people Merrill Lynch recently suggested that Nintendo's console (say it with us, Wii!) will occupy around 30 percent of US households by 2011, and even more in Japan.

On the lighter side, David Harr made himself a little robot just so that he could get a Perfect Dark Zero Achievement on the 360. The 60 point Achievement for playing 2,000 offline deathmatches took him 40 hours to get and it involves pressing just two buttons (start game, quit game). Instead of doing the tedious work himself, David built a little robot, the xBot, to keep pressing those two buttons for him.



BUDGET TOP 20



1. Age of Empires Collector's Edition



2. Brothers in Arms Earned in Blood



3. CSI: Miami



4. Playboy The Mansion Gold Edition



5. Prince of Persia The Two Thrones



6. Age of Mythology Gold Edition



7. CSI: Dark Motives



8. Rainbow Six: Lockdown



9. Rise of Nations Gold Edition



10. Far Cry



11. Rayman 10th Anniversary



12. King Kong



13. Dungeon Siege Legends of Aranna



14. Chessmaster 10th Edition



15. Lock On Air Combat Simulator



16. The Bard's Tale



17. Combat Flight Simulator 2



18. Prince of Persia Warrior Within



19. Pacific Fighters



20. Microsoft Flight Simulator 2002



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GAMING CHARTS

XBOX 360

- 1 Gears of War
- 2 Need for Speed: Carbon
- 3 Lost Planet: Extreme Condition
- 4 Crackdown
- 5 Pro Evolution Soccer 6
- 6 Battlestations Midway
- 7 WWE Smackdown vs Raw
- 8 Fuzion Frenzy 2
- 9 Kameo Elements of Power
- 10 Prey

PLAYSTATION 2

- 1 Final Fantasy XII
- 2 Need for Speed: Carbon
- 3 Buzz! The Sports Quiz
- 4 SingStar Legends
- 5 EA Sports Cricket 07
- 6 EyeToy: Play Sports
- 7 Pro Evolution Soccer 6
- 8 Arthur and the Invisibles
- 9 EyeToy: Kinetic Combat
- 10 Rayman Raving Rabbids

PSP

- 1 Mortal Kombat Unchained
- 2 Need for Speed: Carbon
- 3 Pro Evolution Soccer 6
- 4 The Sims 2 Pets
- 5 WWE Smackdown vs Raw
- 6 Tekken Dark Ressurrection
- 7 Tiger Woods PGA Tour 07
- 8 Grand Theft Auto Vice City
- 9 FIFA 07
- 10 Arthur and the Invisibles

PC GAMES

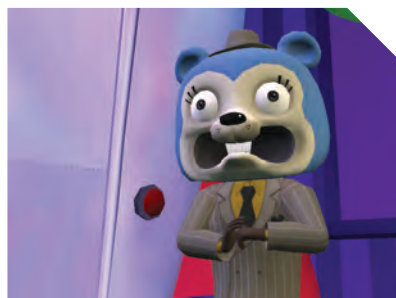
- 1 Supreme Comander
- 2 WoW: The Burning Crusade
- 3 The Sims Life Stories
- 4 The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion
- 5 Need for Speed: Carbon
- 6 The Sims 2
- 7 Sid Meier's Civilization IV: Warlords
- 8 EA Sports Cricket 07
- 9 Neverwinter Nights 2
- 10 The Sims 2 Pets

CAPTION OF THE MONTH

Every month we'll choose a boring, odd or peculiar screenshot from any random game and write a bad caption for it. Your job is to come up with a better [funny] caption. The winner will get a free game from Vivendi Universal Games. Send your captions to ed@nag.co.za with the subject [April Caption].



APRIL CONTEST
NAG'S LAME ATTEMPT:
"PULL!"



MARCH WINNER
"Jimmy needed years of therapy after walking in on his parents having sex."
Neal Derman

RULES: (1) If you don't use the correct subject line, your mail will be automatically filtered by our spam software and deleted. (2) If you think sending in 20 captions for the same screenshot is how you want to play the system, then put them all in the same mail or we'll keep the top one and delete the rest. You probably won't win anyway because you can't follow simple instructions. And people who can't follow simple instructions don't deserve to win things. (3) Obey all posted speed limits. (4) Never run with scissors. (5) There is no spoon. (6) Don't tell me what I can't do!

vivendi GAMES

WE NEED A HERO

Every month, in honour of our new favourite TV show *Heroes*, we'll hide the mysterious mark of the heroes somewhere in the magazine. It could be in a screenshot, on a piece of hardware or anywhere, really. Find it and send an e-mail to ed@nag.co.za with the subject line [Heroes April]. We'll announce a random winner next month and that person will win a fabulous prize from our new sponsor, Trust! See details at the top of the page. And remember: Save the cheerleader, save the world!

LAST MONTH'S WINNER

(Dharma Initiative logo hunt)

Neil Meyerowitz, page 108



CALENDAR

APRIL RELEASE LIST

DAY	GAME	PLATFORM
5	Tony Hawk Project 8	PSP
6	300: March to Glory	PSP
6	Alpha Teens on Machines	PS2
6	Championship Manager 07	360
6	Charlotte's Web	PS2
6	Dragon Ball Z: Shin Budokai Platinum	PSP
6	Full Auto 2	PSP
6	Gunpey	PSP
6	Virtua Tennis 3	Multi
6	Zendoku	PSP
7	Burnout Dominator	Multi
7	Command and Conquer 3: Tiberium Wars (Kane Special Edition) <i>Free T-shirt with order (while stocks last)</i>	PC
7	FIFA 07 Platinum	PS2
7	Medal of Honor: Vanguard <i>Pre-order for only R346.46</i>	PS2
7	The Sims 2: Celebration Stuff <i>Pre-order for only R115.16</i>	PC
13	Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles	Multi
16	Def Jam Icon	360
16	Fast and Furious: Tokyo Drift	PS2
16	UEFA Champions League	Multi
19	All Star Fighters	PS2
19	Capcom Puzzle Word	PSP
19	Coded Arms 2: Contagion	PSP
19	Darwin	PS2
19	Demon Chaos	PS2
19	Dragon Sister	PS2
19	Grand Theft Auto: Vice City Stories	PS2
19	NBA 2K7	PS3
19	NHL 2K7	PS3
19	Oblivion: Shivering Isles	PC
19	Party Carnival	PS2
19	Red Star	PS2
19	Samurai Warriors 2 Empires	PS2
19	Xiaolin Showdown	PSP
19	Zombie Hunters	PS2
19	Zombie Virus	PS2
20	Stacked	PC
23	EA Replay 1	PSP
23	EA Replay 2	PSP
26	Everybody's Tennis	PS2
26	God of War 2	PS2
26	Super Fruitfall	PS2

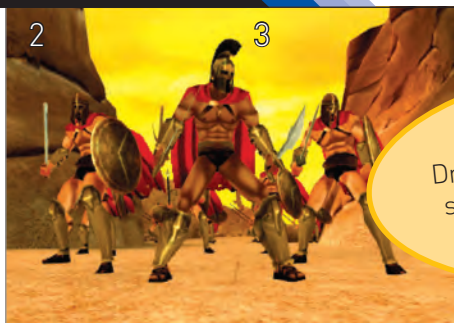
PLAYSTATION 3

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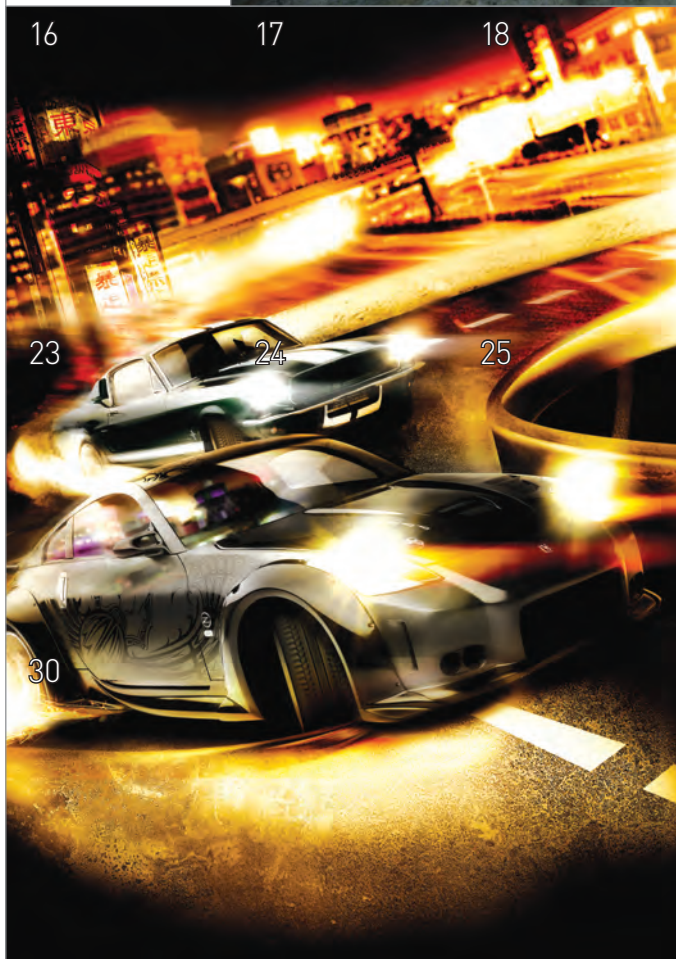
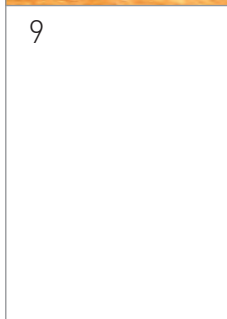
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Q & A WITH INTROVERSION

Chris Delay is the Creative Director at Introversion, a UK-based game development company we here at *NAG* have grown quite fond of. Introversion has shown a penchant for and history of releasing diamonds in the rough: games that may not be able to stand tall against the bigger offerings from huge publishers, but have a unique shine and appeal of their own. With Introversion's super-secretive new game *Subversion* all over the news lately, we decided to catch up with Chris and see what Introversion has been up to.



Chris Delay
Creative Director
Introversion

Starting with three friends who met at university back in 1997 and eventually expanding to a well-recognised team of 10, how has making the dream happen been for you?

It has been the most difficult, thrilling and rewarding thing I think any of us has ever had to do. We've all learnt so much from it and it's great to see how Introversion has matured as we've become more competent and clued up about running a business. Looking back, you realise how naive we all were in many ways. We had absolutely no idea how to make the dream of becoming a games developer a physical reality. There have been some downtimes certainly, like being stung by a US publisher when it filed for bankruptcy, or the time during *Darwinia*'s longwinded development when we ran out of money and had to sell all our belongings on eBay. However, overall it's been worth it. For all the lows, we've had more than equal highs: winning three awards at IGF was the proudest moment of our lives and made all the hard work and sleepless nights worthwhile.

How would you best describe the ethos behind Introversion?

Our ethos is really strikingly simple. We want to create original, innovative and exciting games that people can get totally immersed in. Often the only way to do this practically is by going against the current trends of the games industry, because either we don't have the resources or because we don't agree with the way in which the industry is heading. In the past, this has given us a bit of a maverick status, which is probably fairly natural when you have one developer deciding to head down a different route to the one everyone else is taking. We've been lucky though. There is clearly a demand for both: triple-A games with photorealistic graphics made with an enormous budget; and games like ours that are much more niche, completely unique and created by a very small team of dedicated and passionate developers.

What do you see as Introversion's short-term and long-term goals within the industry?

It's quite difficult because our goals are

always changing. Five years ago, our main goal would have been to sell enough units of *Uplink* to pay off the university debts! We'd never have dreamed that we'd still be here five years on, or that *Darwinia* would have done so well at the IGF awards, or that we would have launched with Valve on Steam. Those would have seemed like impossible dreams at the time. Introversion is probably stronger now than it has even been and obviously with that growth has come an increase in our aspirations. Short-term, we'd love to get our games onto consoles, as this is an extremely difficult step to make for a small independent developer. Nevertheless, it would really boost things for us: not just in the obvious financial sense but also for our image, making Introversion a more credible contender on the game development world stage. Long-term, we're probably most concerned with maintaining our creative freedom - that and obtaining those elusive Ferraris.

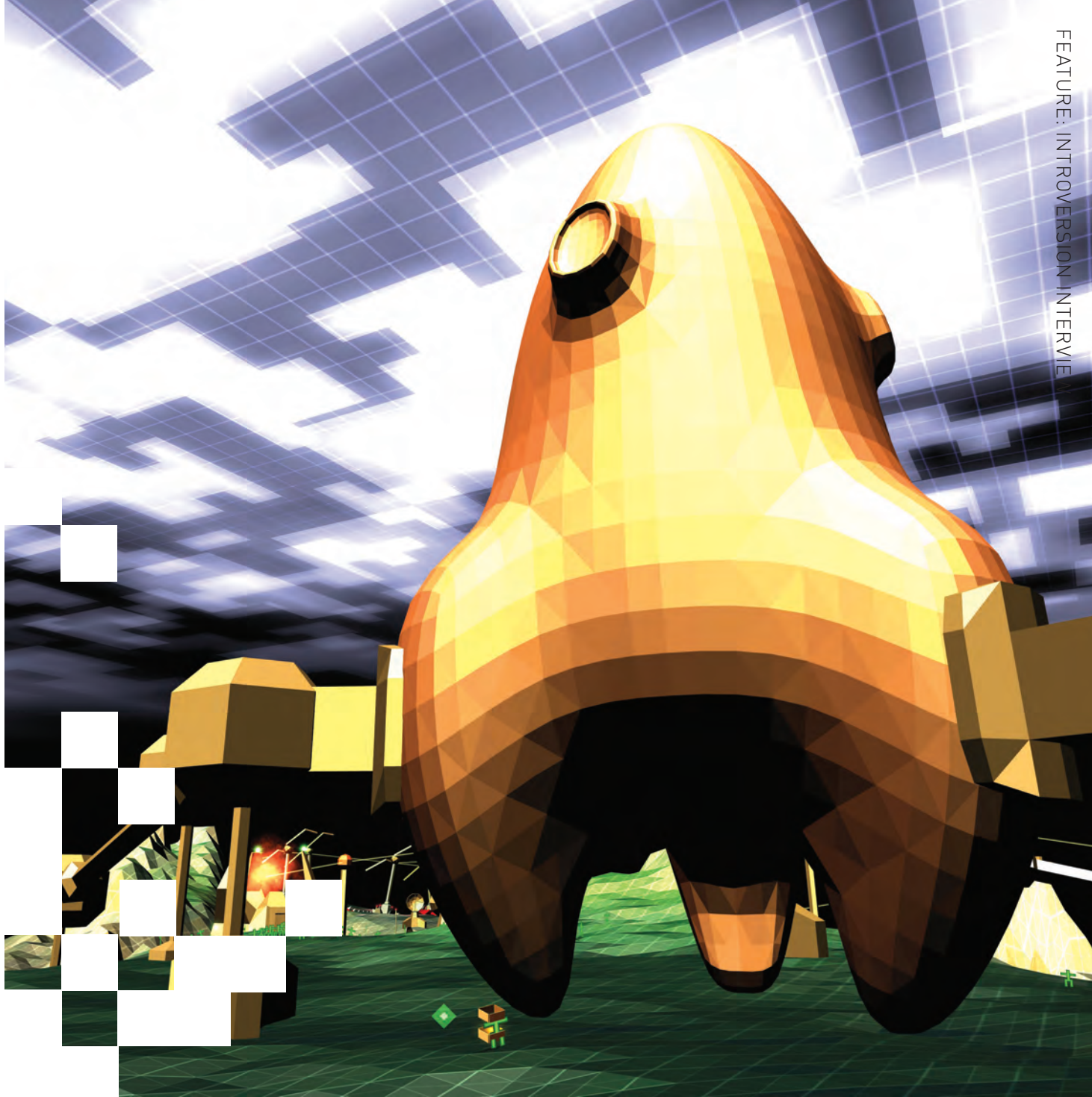
Do you think Introversion will always remain a 'small' company, or are there aspirations of moving to something much bigger? At what times has the small size of your development hindered, and what times has it helped? Are you seeking to expand as necessary, or do you think it's in your best interest to purposefully limit your size?

Expansion is a really tricky area for Introversion or for any small company for that matter. In short, we don't envisage that we will grow to the size of something massive like EA, nor would we want to. Of course, there can be problems with being this small. We have trouble creating new content and new games, an absolute must if we are to remain competitive and afloat. Expansion is the obvious answer, but it can be a daunting prospect for young companies, as the overheads increase at a staggering rate once you reach a certain size. So for the time-being when we need an extra pair of hands we employ freelancers. They generally have little to do with the creation of new IP, as we prefer to keep this in-house where possible. They are there to support what we already have, porting existing games to other platforms,

for example, or helping with the technical support of a game once it's up and running.

In the meantime, we have also been learning to make the most of what we have, using our size as an asset that can reap tremendous creative benefits. We've always been amazed at the sizes some development teams get to - hundreds of developers working on a single design element of a game. It's just a world away from where we're heading. Huge teams are a requirement for developers developing games with masses of content and photorealistic graphics, but there's no way we can compete with those types of games and we actively distance ourselves from them. Instead, we concentrate on using techniques such as procedural content generation to free ourselves from the requirement to design the whole game up front and let loose an expensive army of artists. Procedural generation gives us freedom to experiment - if we make a mistake, we can simply change a couple of parameters





and generate a completely new world from scratch. The graphics might be simple but they perfectly represent the view that the hacker (*Uplink*) or Lunatic General (*DEFCON*) would actually see, so we don't necessarily need photorealism to suspend disbelief and draw the gamer in. In the past, this method has also meant concentrating heavily on the audio, using it to create a more absorbing experience, which is why we have as many audio sound technicians (two) as we have developers. Creating games in this way also enables our development teams to be every bit as creative as a team ten times the size, because it allows for total creative immersion into a project, ensuring an original, high-quality end product that has the unique 'stamp' of its makers and one that hasn't been watered down in the process by interference from third parties. This is particularly important for an Introversion game. Maintaining a small team means that we all understand and work towards a common

“Long-term, we're probably most concerned with maintaining our creative freedom - that and obtaining those elusive Ferraris.”

goal: that goal being the creation of a game that people will identify as an Introversion game – immersive, addictive and wholly unique.

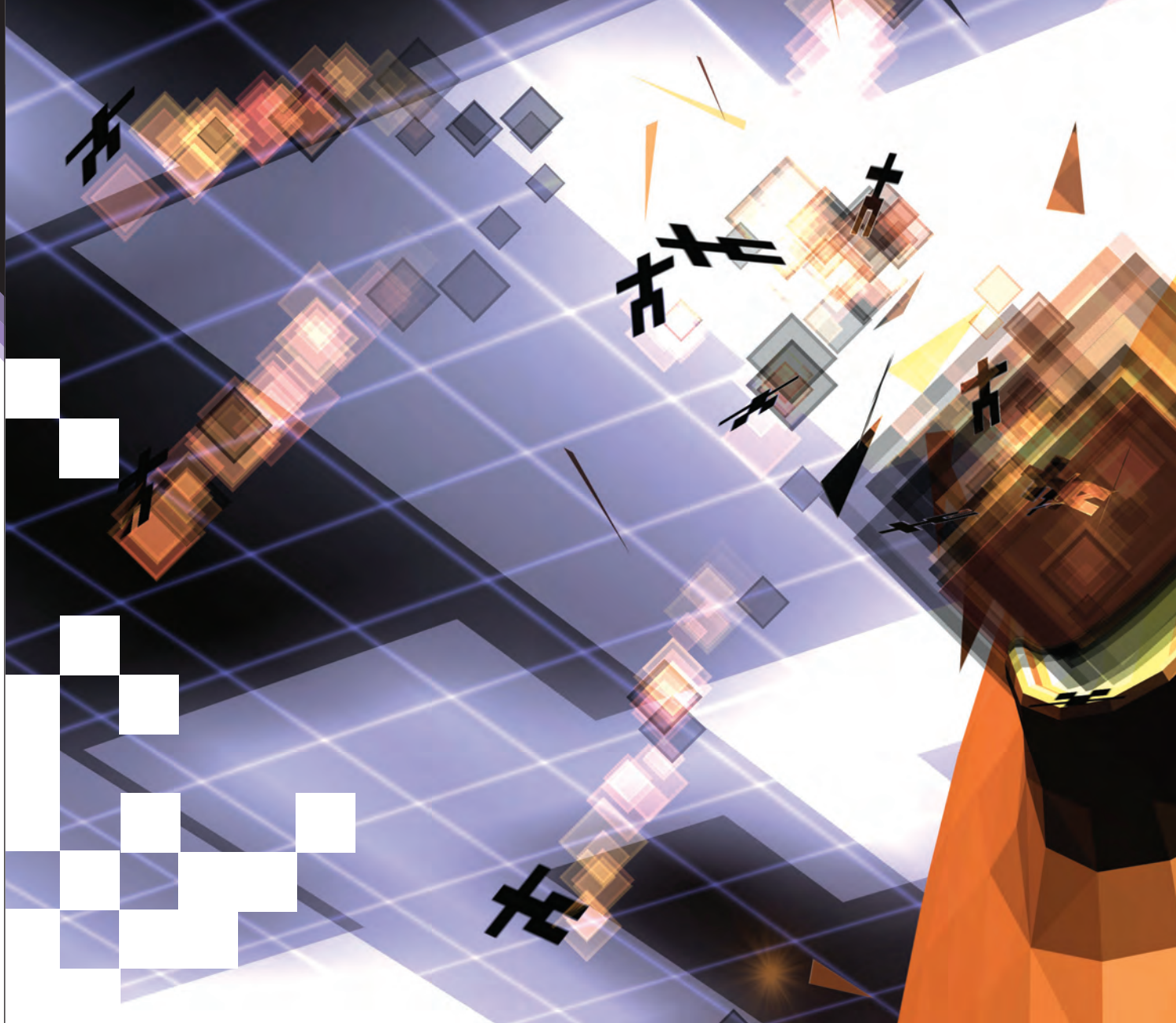
Recently, a DX10 and Vista version of *Darwinia* (which includes various enhancements) was announced. What prompted this move and will we see the same treatment given to *Darwinia* or *DEFCON*?

Putting *Darwinia* onto Vista was seen as another good opportunity to expose it to a wider, more varied audience. As long as we maintain creative freedom, we're happy to

work with publishers; and the opportunity to work with Microsoft on Vista was beneficial because it gives us credibility within the industry. If we want to grow and mature as a company, it is important for us to work with these well-respected and influential companies.

Can we expect to see *Darwinia* or *DEFCON* sold on Microsoft's Xbox Live Marketplace?

We can't really confirm anything about this at the moment, but rest assured, you'd be the first to hear about any such announcements!



As a publishing platform, how has working with Valve and utilising their Steam digital distribution system been? All your titles, *Uplink*, *Darwinia* and *DEFCON* are sold on Steam. How successful has this been for you?

Steam has been a bit of a saviour for us: it has exposed our games to a much larger, more varied audience and financially speaking has been much more lucrative too, as it cuts out the intermediaries such as retailers and distributors, meaning we get a bigger cut of each unit sale. Niche games like ours are also more likely to be accepted for digital distribution, because the financial risks are much lower than for retail. From our point of view, it's a bonus because we no longer have to compete with the bigger publishers for shelf space. It's also definitely helped us to gain credibility in the industry. Valve are a well respected company and teaming up with them has certainly made the games industry sit up and take more notice of us.

***Uplink* was originally released in 2001, and finally appeared on Steam late in 2006. How successful was *Uplink* on Steam specifically, despite having been out in the wild for such a length of time already.**

To be expected, it didn't have a huge spike

■ ■ **Maintaining a small team means that we all understand and work towards a common goal: that goal being the creation of a game that people will identify as an Introversion game – immersive, addictive and wholly unique.** ■ ■

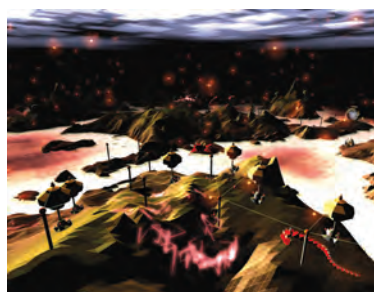
in sales when it first launched on Steam as you would usually get with a new release, but *Uplink* has always been a really steady sell for us, and even though it's now five years old, it regularly outsells *Darwinia* – which is just amazing. Perhaps part of this is that many people had never heard about us until *Darwinia* and so they came to *Uplink* afterwards, which may explain why it's still selling – that and the fact that there's nothing else out there like *Uplink*: it's completely unique.

How is development progressing on your secretive upcoming title, *Subversion*? Is there anything you can tell us about it?

The development process has always been

pretty fluid at Introversion and we're not even sure ourselves what we're aiming for yet. *Subversion* has also only really just gone into serious development although it's an idea that's been floating round in the company archives for quite some time – as far back as 2002. It was put on hold while we were finishing off *Darwinia* and *DEFCON*, and has been bubbling away in the back of our minds for years. Therefore, it's had the most thinking time of all our games and should hopefully reflect that in the end result.

If I'd had my way, we probably wouldn't have divulged anything much about the development of *Subversion*, but the idea was put forward to write a blog, part of which would be a developer diary, and let's just say I



MULTIWINIA
Darwinia, a beautiful single-player game in its own right, always felt as if some multiplayer would really round things off nicely. The very recent announcement of *Multiwinia* brings good news. Introversion has just started work on *Multiwinia*, so a lot of information about the features and new modes remains vague.

"We've always known that *Darwinia* would naturally evolve into an incredible multiplayer game and right from day one I'd had visions of massive Darwinian armies converging for the ultimate Darwinian death-fest," mentions Chris Delay.

We have managed to confirm that *Multiwinia* will be a standalone product (you won't need *Darwinia* for it) and is expected to be a 2008 release. Taking the reins from Chris, John Knottenbelt has stepped up to be lead designer on *Multiwinia* and has this to say about the experience:

"We've created a new formation mode that will let you organise your Darwinians into ranks to create massive armies. In formation, they'll have greater firepower in the direction they're facing, but virtually none from either sides or behind. It's going to get pretty messy, requiring a whole new set of tactical skills from the gamer."



was coerced. I was a bit apprehensive about it at first. You can set up expectations when you divulge too much too early, and you're bound to cause disappointment when you make changes and the end product is different to what people were expecting. Because of this, we're not making any promises and we won't be talking about the features in-game or how the final game will play. Anyway check it out at <http://www.introversion.co.uk/blog> and let us know what you think!

***Darwinia* took roughly three years of development. What critical lessons do you feel you learned from it?**

Specifically that content is bad for a small developer. One of the main problems with *Darwinia* was the huge amount of custom content we had to create – particularly time-consuming when you consider that most of the time we only had one developer working on it, and at maximum two. Even with *Darwinia*'s retro look and feel, it took months to make all the custom content – almost every level had something special on it that wasn't on any other level. Meanwhile, the second demo level we made took us over four months – all for just one level with about an hour's gameplay!

Another reason that *Darwinia* took so long is

due in part to the way we develop our games: it's a very flexible, organic process that is constantly changing. We had no idea for a long time where we were going with *Darwinia*, and even worse, whether we actually had something worthwhile. The story of the Darwinians, the iconic Darwinian sprite and the fractal landscape were all factors that were hit on by accident and were developed pretty late on in development.

We also had many problems at the beginning with *Darwinia*'s release with players complaining that the controls were too hard to learn. In hindsight, the first demo we released wasn't particularly inviting either as it left the player pretty much on their own to figure things out. We learned from these mistakes, and introduced a new demo that was more accessible, a more friendly control mechanism, and a completely new level for players to learn and sample the game.

Will we be seeing *Subversion* retail on Steam?

As I've mentioned, Steam has worked out very well for us in the past, so when the time comes, and if Valve are willing, then I see no reason why *Subversion* shouldn't be out on Steam.

Late last year Introversion teamed up with Philips to create an ambX version of DEFCON. Are you considering giving *Subversion*, or even *Darwinia* or *Uplink* the same treatment?

Yes, we certainly wouldn't be against it. To be honest, at the beginning we were a bit sceptical about it: a lot of other peripherals have been released for the PC and they have added very little to enhance the gaming

experience. However, when we actually went to visit the ambX team and saw their demo room we were blown away. I think we still have some way to go to make what we saw in that demo room a reality for most gamers, and there is undoubtedly a lot of further experimentation to do with the actual peripherals themselves, but the potential for the technology is enormous and very exciting.

If Introversion had the time and budget to create any game at all, what type of game would it be, and if possible, elaborate a little on the thinking behind the choice?

In all honesty, *Subversion* is my dream game, which is just as well really. At Introversion, we aren't bound by the same resource concerns because of the way we handle gameplay and content, and each game we've developed has been our dream game at the time of its making. That's why we started the company!

Have you, or would you, investigate acting as the design group for a larger project that was contracted out to a bigger developer?

It's difficult to make a general statement about this since the question covers such a wide range of possibilities. However, generally speaking, creative freedom is something we have to maintain at all times. If we don't have that creative freedom then we're not so interested in being involved. We also have plenty of our own ideas for future games. *Subversion* is the most developed, but we already have another game design in a fairly advanced stage to come after that, as well as lots of concepts that could be explored. Therefore, we certainly feel no need to be involved in other peoples' projects when we have so many of our own. **NAG**



MIKTAR'S MEANDERINGS

by Miktart Dracon

PRESSING ALL YOUR BUTTONS

YOU LIKE PRETTY GIRLS, don't you? Of course you do, you manly man you. If you're a girl, don't take this the wrong way, but I'm talking to the boys here for a little. Why don't you girls mosey on over to Megan's column a few pages on in the meantime - I won't be long. We men just need to have a little talk.

Right, where were we - oh yes. All you men out there like pretty girls, women, those of the female persuasion, and you're doing our gender proud. But what makes a pretty girl, do you think? Well, from a species perspective and considering how we evolved, a lot of what eventually culminates into feelings of "Dayum, that philly is hawt!" comes from various visual cues that our brains pick up on. This is especially true regarding the facial features of the favoured females: our brain has practically an entire cortex dedicated to telling us what's hot and what's not. Symmetry, proportions and all that jazz, our brain takes a look and sends us back a score on how pretty it all actually is.

Now, the cosmetics industry along with partner-in-crime, the fashion industry, knows exactly how this little gig works. They've spent billions on research, finding out what makes the man tick and tock, depending on the pretty factor of the female face. As a result, these two industries have developed precision advertising using all that research as a foundation. Basically, they can now Photoshop us the perfect woman and nobody even suspects a thing. They change, adjust, lift, tuck and airbrush those faces until eventually a man just has to glance in the general direction and BAM! The man will stand there thinking, "That is a hot woman, and I would like to go to bed with her."

Stop laughing, you know it's true.

So what does all of this have to do with gaming, you might start wondering. Well, an advertising agency is an advertising agency, no matter what industry they work for. The general idea remains the same: find out what makes people drool and then exploit that response with sniper pinpoint accuracy. Just how the brain looks for certain things to indicate a woman you would like to sleep with, so too does the brain look for things that may indicate a game you would like to sleep with. The prettier a game, the more graphically impressive and appealing, and taking into consideration current trends and interests, the more likely you're going to buy it. Right? These advertising agencies and even publishers know what makes a gamer tick. They've spent billions finding out just what type of graphics, what kind of explosions and what style of gameplay would be the most appealing to the mind of a gamer, and they exploit that knowledge. Nothing wrong with that. Right?

Well, there is a slight problem with this idea, both for gaming and regarding women.

The more the brain gets oversaturated with imagery of 'woman hawtness', the higher the benchmark gets set each time, and the less likely you are to look at a 'normal' woman and think, "That is a hot woman, and I would like to go to bed with her." Basically, your perceptions are being adjusted, permanently, by the advertising agency trying to get you to buy that pair of shoes, or car, or makeup. Not that men need makeup. But men want women to wear makeup, since it will make them look as pretty as that airbrushed, Photoshopped beauty on that billboard on the highway. Right? We live in a world of unrealistic expectations, with television shows trying to make us believe that anyone can be a pop star, an American Idol or a rich and 'famous' Jackass. Beauty magazines keep on promoting low self-esteem, and people just lap it up.

Gaming, the hobby we all know and love, is not immune to such ministrations. The same dishonesty that appears in advertising involving beautiful women happens in the advertising of beautiful games.

So fight the power. Buy average-looking games, as long as they're fun. If you see an average-looking woman, think to yourself, "That is an average-looking woman, and I would like to go to bed with her because at least she exists unlike that Photoshopped beauty on that billboard on the highway." **NAG**





Particle man, particle man, doing the things a particle can! What's he like?
It's not important. Particle man.

THE DOMAIN OF THE BASILISK

by Anton Lines

FRAGDOLL PHYSICS

I WAS HAVING A CHAT with someone the other day. No, really, I do occasionally talk to people. Anyway, this partner in conversation (no names mentioned) happened to bring up the topic of the Frag Dolls, which of course I'd never heard of. Said interlocutor (James Francis) expressed his surprise at my lack of knowledge on the subject, especially considering that the Frag Dolls are a famous competitive gaming team - something I ought to know a lot about. Naturally, I was as shocked as my distinguished comrade-in-gaming (the editor of this magazine), and immediately demanded to know what this illustrious team of maestros had achieved. It turns out they'd won the CPL's *Rainbow Six Vegas* (RSV) tournament last year - the first ever 'pro-circuit' win by an all-female team.

Unfortunately for the Frag Dolls, this means only slightly more than nothing. Don't get me wrong, I salute their achievement. Any all-girl team beating their male counterparts is a refreshing reversal of the status quo. However, they are not the first, as their sponsors would have you believe, and until they actually enter a competitive tournament they will be no different from the thousands of women who beat men every day on Xbox Live. Simply put, my issue is not with the team, but with the travesty of calling RSV a pro-circuit title.

It's obviously difficult to compare games with different skill requirements. *Quake*, for example, requires the mathematical ability to work out the spawn times of armour, health and weapons, all while using a complex movement system and managing guns from a large selection. *Counter-Strike*, on the other hand, has fewer variables, but involves the aspect of team coordination, which adds enough complexity to balance things out. I won't try to tell you which of those are more skill-intensive. It would be like comparing cricket to rugby. However, if you put either of them up against RSV, it's like comparing golf to throwing dice.

The only objective comparison we can make is between levels of randomness. Every game (in e-sports and physical sports alike) has its random elements: *Counter-Strike* has its bullet spread; golf has changes in wind direction, et cetera. Nevertheless, randomness and skill are two ends of the same scale, and when one rises there's less scope for the other. This means that as long as the console controller is used for games like RSV, aiming will always be less precise - and therefore more random - than in games that use a mouse.

However, the debate was already settled long before that, because while *Counter-Strike* and *Quake* are professional e-sports, RSV is not. The 'CPL Pro Circuit', if it includes this title, also includes *Guitar Hero 2*, *Soul Calibur III*, *Madden NFL 07*, *Gears of War*, *Tekken 5* and *Splinter Cell: Double Agent*. Now I know some of you will be thinking: "ZOMG Basalesk gitar herro can be just as competitive as quake???" Yes, it can be. But it's not.

At the CPL, and at every other major event, these titles are sideshow novelties, not even worth a mention in the official results. If the Frag Dolls are a pro-team, they're the only pro-team in RSV. None of the others plays games for a living, or even competes in more than one 'major' event per year. Regardless of how many players the game may have on Xbox Live, a real pro-circuit (such as *Halo 2*, if you want a console example) is an entirely different ballpark. When you have an entire field of people who are paid to play, competing in prestigious leagues every week, the standard tends to be significantly higher.

What the Frag Dolls have done is like winning a tournament in Potchefstroom and calling themselves world champions. Their boasting may be a great marketing gimmick, but it diminishes the real achievements of others, like the Girlz of Destruction, who've taken on the toughest professional fields in the world and managed to hold their own. There's no question in my mind as to who deserves the greater respect. **NAG**





DAMMIT

by Megan Hughes

THANK GOODNESS FOR THE INTERNET

THE WORLD IS REALLY becoming a much smaller place to live in. This fact doesn't really become all the apparent, nor relevant, until close family members or friends are suddenly spread all over the globe. Though the actual physical size of the earth has not changed (all of those who thought it had can now rest easy), the actual distance is thankfully no longer an issue in communication (that means 'keeping in touch' for those of you not used to such big words).

As a South African, as most who read this publication are undoubtedly, I have been witness to many emigrations to so-called 'greener pastures'. Many loved ones, both friend and family, have moved on to other countries, leaving us with a worldwide family. Even NAG's very own Anton Lines, The_Basilisk, has made the long trip to the cold and (hopefully for the rest of us) miserable London. Now Australia and the UK are practically overflowing with people from our small tip of Africa. Moreover, since Telkom is still ripping us off for international (not to mention local) calls, it's no wonder we're all making use of the Internet to keep in contact with them.

Obviously, e-mails have become almost vital to communicate over long distances - much quicker than relying on the postal system. Many sites have been set up to keep people in touch. Granted, many of these sites have been overrun by teenyboppers who just want a site of their own or to "make friends" on the Internet. This, thankfully, doesn't affect their usefulness.

MySpace is probably the most famous of these sites, having been mentioned on countless American-made television shows (normally in connection with paedophilic activities, but that's another column altogether). For those of you who apparently don't watch enough television and are thus not well enough informed, MySpace is a place where you can set up your own site and share photos and information with those you consider 'friends'.

Bebo is another site with a similar setup. Its intention, however, seems more aimed at long distance relationships with faraway loved ones. People you have accepted as friends can view your site, which includes photo albums, blogs and quizzes you can make up. Everyone who visits your profile can view any comments left, or drawings put up on your white board. It makes for one worldwide conversation, and the space provided for your very own blog will keep everyone updated on the small and the significant events in your life, while you can view their blogs to see what they've been up to.

Moreover, if keeping a profile and blog up to date as well as watching everyone else's isn't really your thing, you can always opt for the face-to-face kind of communication. Skype, along with most instant messenger services available free on the Internet, offers a 'call' option. Using Webcams and microphones, an almost face-to-face conversation can be had in real time.

Of course, there's also a lot of friends and family who scattered all over our beloved, or hated, piece of this huge island called Africa. Keeping in touch with them is a lot easier than those who are overseas. Even if your dormitories don't have Internet access, the instant messengers available for WAP-enabled phones will keep you in contact wherever you are. Chatting to people using your phone also provides great entertainment during those long and monotonous lectures or staff meetings.

It's actually pretty amazing when one thinks of the fact that not so long ago people wrote letters and just hoped they reached their destination through the post. Sometimes that meant months of hoping and waiting. Most people still of working age could hardly imagine relying on the post these days. Thank goodness, I was born into the age of technology; I'm just far too impatient to deal with the postal service. **NAG**




RAMJET

by Walt Pretorius

MY LIFE HAS BECOME A TALE OF WOE

MY LIFE HAS BECOME a tale of woe. No, really, it has. Being a gaming journalist may seem like a really fun thing to do, but the hardships inherent in this profession are very real. Take, for example, the release of the next-generation gaming consoles. Aside from the fact that my computer is starting to feel neglected (the sad little light on the bottom of a monitor that hasn't been on for weeks is making me feel very guilty), and the fact that my DVD collection is starting to gather dust, I am now faced with some very horrible truths about the state of my gaming condition. I have the comfortable couch and the good speaker system, but the plain truth is that CRT doesn't cut it anymore. The clunky, boxy television sets of old just don't deliver, man. They just don't deliver the goods.

This statement doesn't come from inexperience and empty aspiration. That's where my other statements come from. This statement comes from the fact that, for just a few short days, my tiny living room was dominated by a huge HDTV.

It arrived in a big box and required the relocation of a number of empty beer cans, plastic bottles and crisp packets. My girlfriend suggested that said items be relocated to the dustbin, but I had bigger fish to fry. And so, there it stood, gleaming coldly in all its flat-screened glory, surrounded by monuments of aluminium, plastic and foil (hey, I moved the junk, but I didn't move it far). I hooked the 360 up to it, taking glee in the extra three plugs that needed to be connected... I picked up the remote, my hands trembling like a teenager getting jiggy at a matric dance after-party. I pressed the power button...

I don't remember too much more: the blaze of gaming goodness that the combination of HD and next-gen graphics delivered numbed my brain. I couldn't even tell you how many days passed, although it must have been a few, judging by the odour that I was giving off when my cellphone rang. It may have rung in the previous few days,

but I didn't notice. This time I did, because Fate was obviously having a good laugh at my expense. The voice on the other side said, "They want the TV back... have you finished reviewing it?"

The piles of empty cans, bottles and packets still stand where they stood on that glorious day that the HDTV arrived, paying mute homage to a golden age now sadly gone. I cannot bring myself to bin them, although the girlfriend is getting pretty irate about it. She just doesn't understand. She cannot comprehend what they signify. She cannot grasp the sacrifice I made, all in the name of gaming journalism. See, when a normal person gets an HDTV, they get to keep it. It might cost a lot of money, but it's theirs. Me, I don't have that luxury (having so much fun and getting paid well for it is against the laws of nature, it seems).

And so, the junk-monuments stand around my old battered CRT (considerably farther away that they did around the HD, because my CRT is small). I sit on the couch and mourn every night, staring at the space that was once occupied by many inches of crystal-clear goodness. When I turn the 360 on, I weep a little – partly out of sadness and partly because it's really difficult to read the in-game text on that little, ineffective screen. My favourite games gather dust (much like my DVD collection) because I cannot bear to see them like this: cancerous, pale versions of their former selves.

They say you cannot truly appreciate something until you have lost it. They're right. My life feels like an empty husk of its former self, devoid of the joy that those few short days in HD heaven provided me. Even my 360 looks sad – three of its six once necessary AV plugs hanging as limp and frustrated as a geriatric man in a strip club.

I am going to go cry now. Just a little, just for those fond, sweet, dear memories. And you, well, you should think about this: Is being a gaming journalist that much fun when these are the hardships that you need to face? I think you know the answer to that one. **NAG**



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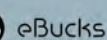
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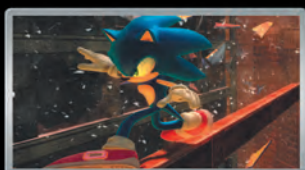
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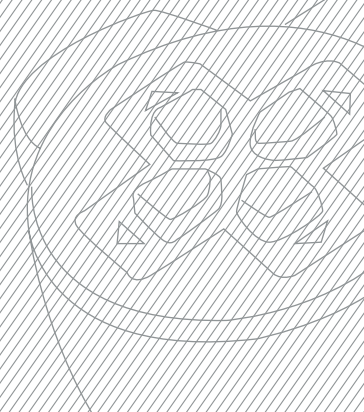




THE FUTURE OF GAMING?

The PlayStation 3 finally lands on our shores at the end of March and thus opens the gates for the next-generation war. NAG spent a few days acquainting itself with Sony's machine and soon realised that if you want the best there is, it'll cost you.

PS3 INS&OUTS



You push it and something happens, eventually. The interface of the PS3 is nice, but compared to its peer the guide button implementation is rather poor. While using the console, this button wasn't nearly as responsive as it should be and there's actually a difference in opinion amongst NAG staffers that it does anything at all. But if you ask us, the whole controller needs a proper rethink.

Four little LED lights represent which player you are. If the light under 1 is lit, that means you're player one and you're in control for the most part. This part of the controller is pretty straightforward. No fancy tilting required except to get a clearer view of the lights.

Using a [very short] USB cable, one side the fat connector and the other side the thin one goes into the controller. You can keep playing while the controller is charging, but the short cable makes this less than ideal. Four ports on the front of the PS3 exist to charge your controllers and for future USB peripherals like EyeToy and Singstar Mics.



The hard drive is a standard laptop SATA model. We didn't get around to putting a new drive in and see what happens, but it's so easy to change the drive with a larger one that we doubt Sony made the software side too technical. An additional connector between the drive and the PS3 isn't required, so you might even manage to McGuyver something larger to it. Just don't come crying to us if it explodes.



Are you a tray person or do you like the soft mechanical clicks of a trayless drive? One the one hand, the elegant design of popping the disc into the drive and watching the PS3 gulp it up is nice, but at the same time, it's also unnerving. A tray looks more snug, but it's really a matter of taste. The discs don't get damaged. It would have been nice, though, if the buttons had a bit more dimension to them.

Not content to just play your games, the front of the PS3 has a flap that can lift to show the memory card slots for all manner of memory card handling. The popular ones are all supported: SD, CF and of course Sony's own format, Memory Stick Pro. You can't save your savegames on these (as far as we know) They're only there for showing off photos or playing music.

Slap a standard Ethernet cable into the network port on the back and you can play supported games networked or online. You need to use this port if you're going to be using the PlayStation Network, and like most good products, all you need to do is plug the PS3 into a router that has Internet connectivity and you're good to go (once you've set up your IP and all that on the PS3).

HDMI stands for High Definition Multimedia Interface, which means that both video and audio comes out of this flat port and into an HDMI capable screen. The unit we tested only had an HDMI cable, which we know, is sold separately. We're not sure if the PS3 will be sold with a Component cable (High Definition) or a Composite cable (Standard Definition, like TV) or both. FYI, HDMI on a Bravia looks gorgeous.

The PS3 might seem big, but it houses its power brick inside. That means all you need is the kettle plug going from the machine to your wall. But we'd invest in a surge plug as well, because you really don't want your console to be fried by a sudden rush of power in the neighborhood, now do you?

THE GAMES



MOTORSTORM

Genre: Racing
Developer: Evolution
Publisher: SCEE

Mud, sweat, tears! You are an entrant to a yearly festival that combines rock concerts and drunken attendees with off-road action like we've never experienced before. You will recall *Motorstorm* as one of the first games demonstrated by the early concept trailers released by Sony in 2005. Now, the real thing is out there and kicking dirt in everyone's faces. No expense has been spared, and the development team had 15 hours of high-resolution footage recorded in the Nevada desert – just to make sure things look like they should. That attention to detail shows and the levels look gorgeous. Likewise, the vehicles in the game are not only very detailed and highly destructible, but their physics react to the constantly changing track. As racers tear through the mud, their tracks remain behind and change the layout of the course. That makes it a lot trickier to stay ahead and become the champion. With trucks, off-roads, bikes and more competing, it's bound to be chaos.



RESISTANCE: FALL OF MAN

Genre: FPS
Developer: Insomniac Games
Publisher: SCEE

Brits and Yanks team up to try and save Europe and Asia from a horrible scourge: the turns-man-to-beast Chimera virus of unknown origins. Humanity seems screwed and hope is all but lost and resting on you: US Army Ranger, Sgt. Nathan Hale. It's a bit odd to see the *Ratchet & Clank* and *Spyro* developer tackle such a different topic and style, but it shows Insomniac Games' grit as a professional studio capable of shifting gears when needed. The PlayStation 3 needed a strong first-person shooter to endear it to fans of the genre, and *Resistance* appears to be that FPS. We've grabbed some hands-on time with it, and the controls are tight, along with the crisp visuals. Enemies move with appreciable fluidity and overall, *Resistance* manages to keep the pace and surprise you with some rather stunning scenes (such as a large-scale battle in the centre of a large courtyard that even involves drop ships and giant robots).

Resistance sports a cooperative mode and a complete multiplayer setup for some fragging, as is expected from a solid launch title.

DEVIL MAY CRY 4

Genre: Action/Adventure
Developer: Capcom
Publisher: Capcom

You never quite know what Dante, son of legendary Dark Knight Sparda, is thinking. Devil hunter by trade and smartass by disposition, it seems that he's off killing holy knights in *Devil May Cry 4*, which is (at the time of writing) a PlayStation 3 exclusive. This time around, players control series-newcomer Nero, in addition to Dante, and will have to fight serious demonic opposition using close combat techniques, swords, guns and demonic weaponry. We personally hope the bat-shooting Electric Guitar makes a return.

Devil May Cry 4 is set to feature new weapons, moves, music and locations, but Capcom is being secretive about it. Series producer Hiroyuki Kobayashi mentions that he's been focusing his optimisations on gameplay to make it easier to control characters, opening up accessibility a little. Not bad, considering that *Devil May Cry* has made a name for itself by being tough as nails. Nero has a "Devil Bringer" arm that lets you use all sorts of Jedi force powers on enemies, pushing, pulling and slamming in a totally next-gen way.



TAKE CONTROL

The SIXAXIS is a bit of a mystery. On the one side, it's the familiar dual-shock design from the PlayStation 2. On the other hand, anyone who argues that the PS2 has the best controller ever made for a console, clearly only spends time on one console. A lot of criticism has been levelled at the DualShock, especially regarding FPS titles, which prefer the analogues further apart. However, the real problem is the lack of rumble. No amount of Sony spin can

hide the fact that it screwed up and dropped the ball on a very essential part of any current console controller. Then there is the inclusion of tilt control, which, judging by the limited use made of it by the two games provided (*Genji* and *Resistance*), will require some inspired developer intervention to make any real impression. It's simply not intuitive, and flicking your controller to flip a character around is harder than just using an analogue. Above all, the

SIXAXIS' painfully close resemblance to the DualShock is a bit of a contrast to the slick lines of the PS3 itself.

Nevertheless, since Sony sorted out its legal wrangling with Immersion, the rumble might return and it's apt to remember that Microsoft reworked the Xbox controller early on due to criticism. Sony can address some of the SIXAXIS' problems. It is, after all, modelled on the DualShock, which isn't a bad controller to begin with.

WARHAWK

Genre: Flight/Action
Developer: Incog Inc.
Publisher: SCE

Originally released on the venerable Commodore 64, later re-released for the PSone, and now set for some next-gen styling on the PS3, *Warhawk* is an exclusively online multiplayer third-person shooter that takes advantage of the SIXAXIS Controller's tilt and motion sensors. The game features multi-model battles between the Eucadian and Chernovan forces, with seamless switching between aerial, ground vehicle, and foot combat at the push of a button. It's aces high as players take to the skies in the *Warhawk* or *Nemesis* - high-velocity dogfighters locked and loaded with swarm missiles, cluster bombs, and man-splattering machine guns. Trundle around in a tank, throw rockets, or scurry about harum-scarum in your hobnailed boots, crisping the enemy infantry with flamethrowers.

Warhawk includes 25 maps spanning five different worlds, supports up to 32 players, and trots out the usual game modes - Deathmatch, Team Deathmatch and Capture the Flag - as well as something called Zone Combat, which sounds like a cross between *UT2004*'s Domination and Onslaught modes. Players must seize and maintain control of nodes on the map, for which they're awarded a point bonus. Linking these nodes to their primary base will earn additional benefits, including new spawn points, equipment or vehicles.



NINJA GAIDEN SIGMA

Genre: Action
Developer: Team Ninja
Publisher: Tecmo

From the NES, to the SNES, to the Sega Master System and Game Gear, to the original Xbox, and now emerging in the next-gen arena on the PS3, the *Ninja Gaiden* series boasts a pretty distinguished legacy. Known for their diabolical levels of difficulty, the games put you in the claw-footed boots of Ryu Hayabusa, a ninja whose family, acquaintances and weapons have a worrying habit of being abducted by shadowy villains with nefarious agendas. While it's quite likely that the world would probably be a safer place without Ryu, he has selflessly dedicated himself to defeating the forces of evil, setting wrong to right, and all that other Zen guff. *Ninja Gaiden Sigma* includes a sort of director's cut of the Xbox's *Ninja Gaiden* and *Ninja Gaiden Black*, with additional difficulty levels, new moves, and a clutch of new missions. For its latest incarnation, of course, even more cool stuff has been added. It's all a bit confusing, but basically, it's more of the same but now with a big shiny next-gen graphics overhaul. Team Ninja is playing coy about gameplay enhancements, but Rachel, the Fiend Hunter hottie from *Ninja Gaiden*, will be making a return.

KILLZONE 2

Genre: FPS
Developer: Guerrilla
Publisher: SCE

A controversial little number, this one. An astonishing video was shown at E3 2005, supposedly of actual gameplay. However, it was later accused of having been a pre-rendered sequence. Since then, Sony has remained resolutely coy about it all, so all we had to go on was this "Maybe it is, maybe it isn't" trailer. A new trailer was trotted out at the recent Game Developers Conference, but Phil Harrison, Sony VP, was anxious to emphasise that the demo was meant to highlight the technology, not the game itself. As marketing strategies go, it certainly is a novel one. It's just not a very good one.

What we do know for sure is that *Killzone 2*, much like its predecessor, is an FPS set in a not-too-distant future, during a war-torn period of planetary colonisation. The pan-galactic squabbling involves two factions: those loyal to Earth, the human ISA; and some sort of separatist paramilitary brood of muties, called the Helghast. At this stage, the actual story is anyone's guess, but the game will feature on-foot and vehicle combat across a variety of terrains. Hard-to-find fact sheets promise benchmark character animation, fancy physics models, and destructible environments. We'll have to wait and see.



PLAYSTATION HOME

In a recent surprise announcement, Sony unveiled its PlayStation Home initiative and surprised everyone. Home allows you to create an avatar for yourself on the PlayStation 3. This avatar gets its own house that can be decorated with trophies players receive for doing specific things in games that support the Home Trophy system. Sony stated that in future the service would be expanded to let you have clothing and pets. There is no doubt future content may involve purchasing it in a micro transaction way, which will no doubt be popular despite charging you

money for virtual furniture. Sony has already confirmed that purchases made through Home will use the Wallet.

Loading up Home puts you in the main lounge area where you can talk to others and play various multiplayer mini games right there in the lounge. From there, you can visit your apartment or travel around to the other locations in Home. You can also be invited to another player's apartment. In this virtual world, you'll be able to communicate with others via text or voice chat, listen to music or even share content. If you invite someone into

your apartment, you can stream them music or movies you have on your PS3 HDD (although we wonder if this won't cause copyright infringement problems). Sony plans to install cinemas in the virtual world that will stream new trailers to people who decide to visit them.

The idea behind Home is to bring the Second Life style online interaction to the mainstream, letting people who thought that virtual worlds were nerdy enjoy the interaction in a friendly way. When launched, Sony hopes to make the download for Home smaller than 500MB.

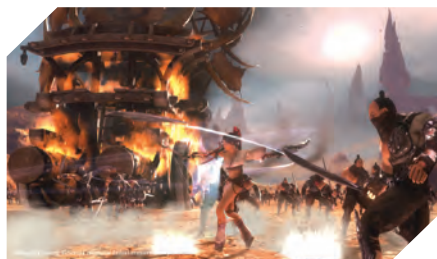
THE GAMES



METAL GEAR SOLID 4

Genre: Tactical
Developer: Konami
Publisher: Konami

The future is looking very bleak, according to *Metal Gear Solid 4*. The entire world has been ravaged by an ongoing war, and unlike previous adventures, Solid Snake will not just be infiltrating one or two buildings, but rather entire battlefields with every soldier a threat to his very survival. New machines now walk through the streets with some even being part human, and although Snake is now an old man, he still has some fight left in him. This, as well as stunning new visuals and functions, is what the creators of the series have promised us in the next instalment. With a degree of intelligence built in, soldiers will now have their own thoughts in terms of what to do, and it will be up to the player to either befriend them or kill them. Whatever he or she chooses, it will affect his or her relationship with their comrades during the rest of the game. *MGS4* looks to be going back to the roots of the series. Even the father of the PlayStation, Ken Kutaragi, has called this game an achievement. Whatever the case, it makes the PS3's price look a whole lot more acceptable in the end. This game will be legendary!



HEAVENLY SWORD

Genre: Action
Developer: Ninja Theory
Publisher: SCE

Heavenly Sword promises to add a completely new dimension to the hack and slash genre, while at the same time breaking barriers in the graphics industry. This all-new martial arts title looks to be packed with action with the emphasis on both melee and ranged combat. The name is derived from the main weapon in the game, which can transform into a multitude of other weapons, all of which are completely useable with a player's choice of stance. The story follows a young woman who has only a few days left to live. These days, she decides, will be used to challenge the emperor and redeem the country from his reign. During this quest, she will have to face entire armies on the battlefield.

The camera angles will also rely on the positioning of the all-new SIXAXIS Controller, where, if a player tilts it to the side, the camera will tilt as well. If you enjoyed *God of War*, then you will love *Heavenly Sword*, which has affectionately been nicknamed "Goddess of War" due to the similarity. This PS3 exclusive game promises to bring many new fans into the fold and leave the other Sony haters eating their words. Get ready for the time of your life. Well, at least the bloodiest time of it.

GRAN TURISMO HD

Genre: Racing
Developer: Polyphony
Publisher: SCE

Racing fans' dreams have just been realised with the PS3 exclusive, *Gran Turismo HD*. A compilation of all its predecessors, *GT HD* will offer two modes of gameplay: Classic and Premium. Classic mode includes all the features that *GT* fans have come to know, with over 750 different cars, all of which have been remodelled and textured for an HD display. Premium consists of only 30 different cars, but they're perfectly detailed down to the last indentation. They consist of over 10,000 polygons each - an extreme amount when considering that the classic cars consist of only a couple of thousand. Each Premium car took about six months to model, which shows the amount of passion that the developers put into this title. The physics of this title are also a work of genius, leaving the need for multiple difficulty settings. *GT HD* will probably be the most realistic racing simulation ever developed for a console, making it a highly desirable game. Even Ferrari has finally signed on to feature its cars in the game, which is a first for the series. It's no wonder why it's an exclusive title, because few consoles would be able to handle such an immense graphical treat as this.



PLAYSTATION NETWORK

The PlayStation Network is Sony's free online service and is exclusive to the PlayStation 3. We decided to see how easy it is to get going and connect to the Network. To connect, you just navigate your Crossbar to the PlayStation Network icon and finish a sign-up process with your account name and password. You can also set up your billing information right there or skip it - we skipped it because the PS3 we had was NTSC and thus not really useful for checking out how billing works. The PlayStation Network is where you'll find opponents, check out the rankings, chat via voice, video and messages, as well as browse the Web and the PlayStation Store.

We also checked out the PlayStation store, which is where you can download PlayStation Network games as well as demos, trailers, game videos and add-on content. Original PlayStation games can be bought and played on the PS3 or downloaded to the PSP and played there, but you'll need a 1GB or larger memory stick. PlayStation Network games, like *Flow*, are games created exclusively for download to the PS3. After putting some money into the Wallet via credit card (reports indicate that the PlayStation 3 will use local currency), you can use that money to buy PlayStation Network games. The PlayStation Store interface is slick and packed with

content, which is a good sign for the Store. It shares its controls and layout with the PlayStation 3 Web browser, which helps keep things simple. Unfortunately, we didn't have time to complete a download [the smallest download we could find was around 100MB]. Right now, you can't download and browse the Store at the same time - downloading cannot be interrupted. It is confirmed, though, that a future firmware update will allow background downloading, but not while playing games. All of the online services, from sign-up through to voice and video chat, are free, along with online multiplayer gaming.

THE VERDICT

After much toying, thinking, pondering, sleeping and doodling, we made up our minds about the PlayStation 3. Here's what we thought:

MICHAEL JAMES

Managing Editor, NAG

Well, it's big, heavy and shiny: three key factors that will probably make you feel better about buying it. This will be your first impression of the PS3. From there, you'll need to switch it on and stick in a game or movie to really see if Sony's entry into the next-generation console race is better than or worse than or the same as the Xbox 360. It might be a little like comparing green apples to red apples, but the technological difference and subsequent price difference need to be looked at. On the gaming side, playing *Resistance: Fall of Man* was a cracking good experience. Pretty effects and heaps of polygons were being thrown around with relative ease - it's smooth and looks everything the part of a next-generation gaming platform. It also has all the promise that given some time, developers everywhere are going to impress the socks off gamers with future titles: history has shown us that the longer a console stays in the market the better the games get. The Blu-ray movies are another story entirely with their vivid and crispy visuals, but you have to consider buying a screen with the right plugs at the back to really take advantage of the high-definition visuals. Overall, the PS3 is as strong an entry into the market as everyone is expecting. Pricing is going to hurt it here and there, but if you're a big enough PlayStation fan, you probably won't care.

JAMES FRANCIS

Editor, NAG

If the PS3 and the 360 sold for the same price, I'd be more inclined towards Sony's machine. However, it's very expensive and is bound to be as rare as chicken's teeth in the first few months anyway. The early local adopters will be people who have the disposable income to afford an HDTV with HDMI and the rather expensive Blu-ray movies. Sure, fine, Sony can say it's more than a console, but that's not enough to convince gamers it's worth the price tag. All that said, it does purr like a cat - figuratively speaking, of course. There are some design decisions that I don't like, such as the embedded power and eject buttons, but the unit certainly looks the money. That is if you ignore the SIXAXIS, which clearly comes from a retooled PS2 line. Sure, it's better than that boomerang controller, but it's still not ideal. Sony should also consider that a lot of us would appreciate a slightly larger controller for its consoles. The easy-to-upgrade hard drive is a nice touch, and the menu and other interfaces look brilliant. While playing a game, the PS3 hardly breaks a sweat and there's little argument over which is the most powerful console of the next generation. But it'll need more than that - the games always decide the console's fate. If time allows it, Sony can mould the PS3 into a very nice buy if it slims it down, irons out the problems with the controller, and drops the price. Nevertheless, the PS3 has very few flaws of its own.

MIKTAR DRACON

Games Editor, NAG

Having now finally sat down with the PlayStation 3 and given it a serious look, it is pretty clear that what we have here is a powerful machine primed for gaming, media and other distractions. The limited titles we had for a hands-on speak plain impressive visuals - on par with the other 'next-gen' console. Aside from its extreme gloss coating, the PS3 seems to shine most when looked at in its entirety - when you look at each function separately, they individually don't surpass any expectations. The greatest strength of the PS3 seems to be what lies in store for it in the near future. Sony Home and *LittleBigPlanet* are both 'killer apps' in the clearest sense. They both represent a significant step forward in their respective areas and are both exclusive to the PS3. The truth about the tilt-sensing SIXAXIS is that it really doesn't matter and doesn't bring anything worthwhile to the table - the PS3 doesn't need a fancy control gimmick anyway and Sony was mistaken in thinking it does. What the PS3 needs, it apparently will be getting eventually, such as a drop in price, a smaller form factor, a more cohesive online strategy and more games that push the envelope. **NAG**



AND ON THE SEVENTH DAY, HE QUICK SAVED

HAVE YOU PICKED UP an old NAG recently and paged through the previews from a long, long time ago in a galaxy far away? We recently found some old NAG tomes in the dusty catacombs below the giant NAG-o-plex 50-story building where we ply our craft. These NAG tomes were carbon-dated to around 2000 BC, but carbon-dating is an imprecise science and was recently found to have incorrectly dated dinosaurs, which we now know for certain only really went

extinct last week before Thursday. What we discovered inside the ancient engraved granite slabs revealed great secrets to us - knowledge that has been lost to the ages. We are reasonably certain that, if our translations are correct, *Duke Nukem Forever* will rise again. We can't be 100% sure though: people weren't good writers back in 2000 BC and constantly confused 'its' with 'it's', which is just downright confusing.

CONAN

Developer→ Nihilistic | **Publisher**→ THQ | **Platforms**→ PS3, 360
Genre→ Action | **Release Date**→ 2008

Ah, *Conan*, how glad we are to see you back. You could be a fan of the books, the comics or even Arnie and Dino's great set of movies (which should have been a trilogy, but that never happened), but if you dig the thief from Cimmeria, then you are definitely looking forward to any games starring him. Yeah, sure, there was that game from a few years ago that almost nobody played, but the industry seems to have been stung by the spirit of "don't make license crap" and many of these games are looking better and better. Also, it would appear as if Nihilistic was smart enough to appreciate the beauty of *God of War* (a title that is steadily gaining a chorus of clones), and *Conan* looks set to run around, kicking against walls, chopping off heads and bring down power combos that his enemies have never encountered before - no, not even in the comics. All the buzzwords accompany it (especially that increasingly-common Cinematic Gameplay Experience one), but since it's only due on the next-gens next year, that means at the very least it's going to be pretty and hopefully it'll rock pretty damn hard.



MERCENARIES 2

Developer→ Pandemic | **Publisher**→ EA
Platforms→ 360, PS3, PS2, PC
Genre→ Action | **Release Date**→ 2007

Not one, not two, not three, but four platforms! Some might lament how the PlayStation 3 lost yet another exclusive, but *Mercenaries 2* was never promoted specifically as one. Besides, this isn't a matter of losing exclusivity - it's an explosion of the major non-mobile platforms in the market. If you missed it the first time, the *Mercenaries* series takes players into war zones (the first was the DMZ splitting Korea; this time it's the sunny land of Venezuela - yes, America's leftists presidents have already lodged their complaints, though Pandemic assures us it's not involved in a plot with George Dubya to discredit the country). Your merc, this time a guy sporting plenty of tattoos and a Mohawk, will be running around the world, taking on missions, hijacking tanks and blowing up many, many buildings. The big question is whether the PS2's inclusion on the release list will hold back the eye candy and über-destruction we're hoping to see on the new bloods. Nevertheless, Pandemic also assures everyone that this won't be the case, and the PS2 still has a lot of juice left in it. Either way, now you don't HAVE to get a PS3 or 360 to play this game.



EMPIRE EARTH 3

Developer→ Mad Doc Software | **Publisher**→ Vivendi
Platforms→ PC | **Genre**→ Strategy | **Release Date**→ Q3 2007

Ah, yes, a new *Empire Earth* has been announced! Fans will be familiar with its history and style, but briefly, it's a real-time strategy title where players basically build an empire from the monolithic beginnings of men with clubs through to the same men, but with lasers. It's that *Ages* kind of game that *Age of Empires* initiated and has since found further support in the *EE* series. What can you expect? We don't know yet: Mad Doc is still mum on what new changes and addition are being made. Judging by the solitary screenshot released so far, though, an engine overhaul is obvious. Perhaps it's a whole new engine altogether! We're also assuming new features, nations and units will show. However, who really knows? Maybe there



are new ages or a new, larger scale to the whole game. Maybe it's just *EE2*, but prettier. Has Mad Doc given us any reason in recent years to doubt its development pedigree? No, sir! We'll have to stay on top of this one!

JUICED 2

Developer→ Juice Games | **Publisher**→ THQ
Platforms→ PC, PS2, PS3, 360, PSP
Genre→ Racing | **Release Date**→ Q3 2007

Man, *Juiced* was so close to being a flop. It was a good game, but it took the brave step to, firstly, step into the arena absolutely dominated by *Need for Speed*, and, secondly, to do things a bit differently. That means any yahoo who considers *NFS* the pinnacle of all racing (something more serious racing game fans take offense to) probably skipped over *Juiced* because it was too complicated for them. Luckily a lot of gamers kept an open mind and found a classic, if flawed, game in *Juiced* - enough, clearly, to warrant a sequel. It ties in with the real Hot Import Nights tour, which we assume is some kind of American car porn festival. All the cool aspects are apparently still there, such as the gambling and crew racing. A few new features, such as expanded drift racing, will also debut in the series and fans can expect the massive amount of customisation combos to return (90+ cars with 250+ modes so far). Finally, it's coming to every platform you and your hamster own, so the *Juiced* magic hopefully won't struggle under the shadows of its peers again.



FREE RUNNING

Developer→ Rebellion | **Publisher**→ Ubisoft
Platforms→ PS2, PSP | **Genre**→ Sport
Release Date→ April 2007

Who is actually developing this game? Currently it resides in the hands of experienced crew Rebellion and shares its publishing/distribution between Reef and Ubisoft. That's after it originated as a game designed by former *Tomb Raider* developer Core and destined to be published by Eidos. Very curious! However, less so and more interesting is that the game takes on that crazy and trendy urban 'sport' of parkour. You could probably call it a sport, but how do you keep score of people running up and over walls, making huge leaps, slipping between the bars of staircase railings and overall making people hold their breath, waiting for someone to plummet to their doom or hit a concrete wall face first. Obviously, we want to play this, and the copy of the game that has just arrived will be at our mercy as soon as this issue is done and out of the way. The game incorporates the experience and expertise of legendary 'tracur' Sébastien Fouchan, one of the founders of the sport, and the famed UK parkour group, Urban Freeflow. Fans can expect over 50 moves and lots of insane terrain in the final title.



ALIEN SYNDROME

Developer→ Totally Games | **Publisher**→ Sega
Platforms→ PSP, Wii | **Genre**→ Action
Release Date→ Q2 2007

No, it has nothing to do with Sega's recent resurrection of the *Aliens* game license, though parts of the original game certainly does beckon to the movies of roughly the same name. But if you can cast your mind back nearly twenty years, you might remember the 1988 game, which involved one to two players going into a space station and rescuing survivors from the attacking alien monsters, obviously shooting said monsters as well. However, many people probably won't recall it and the game only resurfaced once again in 2004 as part of a Sega retro pack. Still, it was one of the platform hogs of its day, being released on everything out there. The remake is more sober and subdued, opting for the selective platforms of the PSP and Wii to do business on. Little has been shown of this game, but early screenshots suggest a camera more angled towards your character than the top-down face of the first game. A nice change is that the co-op campaign will support up to four players, giving way to a lot of mayhem up the road (especially with over 20 weapons planned).

WHERE ARE THEY NOW?

DUKE NUKEM FOREVER

Repent, because while *Duke* may have become the laughing stock of the industry, he will rise to kick ass and quote Bruce Campbell again. *Forever* started life before 1998 and is still not dead according to 3D Realms. It started life on the Quake II engine, then swapped to the Unreal Engine, traded physics engines a few times, and even had a brief rumoured fling with the Doom 3 engine, which George Broussard has denied. *Forever* has been awarded the Vaporware Award from Wired News several times - almost yearly, actually, from 2000 right through to 2006. Plans for a sequel are rumoured to be underway.

ELITE 4

Long before *Freelancer* led you to believe that it was 'da bomb' in terms of space trading and exploration, David Braben gifted this world with *Elite*. One of the first home computer games to use wireframe 3D graphics, *Elite* was also possibly the first game to bundle a book with the game. All those games out there in which you fly a space ship, fight aliens, upgrade your weapons and participate in trade or diplomatic missions owe their genre to *Elite*. *EVE Online*, *Wing Commander: Privateer* and the *X* series of space trading games are all the bastard children of Braben's original vision. *Elite 4* was rumoured, but is still lost in space.

SUPER MARIO 128

It seems that the only game to not have come out of development on *Super Mario 128* is *Super Mario 128*. The series of development projects that have been labelled as Mario 128 gave rise to technology and techniques that were incorporated into *Pikmin*, *Legend of Zelda: Twilight Princess* and *Super Mario Galaxy*. Even *Metroid Prime: Hunters* owes its physics technology to the work done on *Super Mario 128*, the sequel to *Mario 64*. Announced as far back as 1997, the only thing father Miyamoto can tell us about what's going on with Mario 128 is, "It's moving along secretly like a submarine under the water." You may have stolen our hearts Shigeru, but you'll never sink our battleship.

STARCRAFT: GHOST

The Earth was torn asunder when PC gamers heard the apocalyptic news: Blizzard, the king of PC games (ignoring its early console games such as *Blackthorn*, *Rock 'n Roll Racing* and *Lost Vikings*) was developing a console game. Howling lament from millions of upset gamers filled the Internet skies. It is without irony that in reality Blizzard wasn't doing anything. They handed development of *Ghost* over to Nihilistic, then Swingin' Ape Studios and we think they even let a few kindergartners use their crayons to design some units. However, the whole thing got canned without an explanation why. We think PC gamers are holding their families hostage.

WARCRAFT ADVENTURES: LORD OF THE CLANS

Did you know that Blizzard used to develop other games before *World of Warcraft* - games that were not MMORPGs? It's hard to believe, we know, but a long time ago Blizzard was known for developing exemplary strategy games with hearty lore and tons of silly jokes. *Lord of the Clans* was to be a dark, comical point-and-click adventure game and it looked divine. Originally set for a 1997 release, the game was cancelled because Blizzard felt it was crap and "would have been great three years ago." The game was literally almost complete and had the voice talents of Peter Cullen (*Optimus Prime*) and Clancy Brown (*Highlander*). At least it inspired a book of the same name.

GHOST RECON ADVANCED WARFIGHTER 2

IT SAYS SOMETHING ABOUT a series when the following conversation takes place:

"Have you played *Advanced Warfighter* yet?"

"What?"

"You know, *Ghost Recon*..."

"Uh..."

"*GRAW*."

"Oh! Yeah, of course!"

Yes, of course. Everyone who should have played *GRAW*, the timely resurrection of the *Ghost Recon* brand. Not that the squad of über-elite black-ops soldiers really needed saving, but the series' habit of leaning towards the more hardcore tactical gamer has always kept it at bay from the eager fingers of other players. Between *GR* and *Rainbow 6* a slow revolution started to occur as both series looked more towards appealing to console gamers. The reward was very generous: both quickly took top spots on the Xbox and 360's respective online lists, and *GRAW* became the *de facto* poster-child for the early online 360 games. Since then a few things have happened, most notably the arrival of *RS: Vegas*. Clearly, tactical military manoeuvres are back in vogue with action junkies around the globe.

You'd have to be totally inebriated to ever argue that a *GRAW 2* sequel wouldn't appear.

Obviously it's on its way and a Beta copy of the game arrived at NAG for our gaming pleasure. Being very incomplete, the code had a tendency to crash or not update waypoints, but that's the hazard of looking at pre-Gold code, especially something still in its Beta phase. Nevertheless, these niggles aside, *GRAW 2* is looking stunning. Hardcore fans will be able to dig up many small tweaks that improve the game, yet anyone will see the graphical update. Higher resolution textures and ample use of shaders and other fancy graphical effects have certainly raised the bar on the game's depth. The main characters are quite detailed, and you get quite a kick from watching your Ghost's studded body armour react to the surrounding light. Plenty of translucent surfaces feature, allowing light to penetrate them and create a more ambient feel to areas. This isn't obvious when you look at screenshots, but it can't escape you when running around the levels.

GRAW might have felt big and deep, but compared to its sequel, the game is really cramped and claustrophobic. *GRAW 2* features larger levels with larger areas in it. Likewise, many other things in it also feel bigger. The explosions are perhaps the best example: after placing a nip of a bomb on some enemy equipment and standing back



the prerequisite distance required in games when pushing little red buttons, the world blurred and the Ghost got pushed back by the sheer force. Explosions in *GRAW 2* are big and impressive. On the flip side, the support the enemy has is nothing to scoff at either. To give you a tactical edge over these terrorists of democracy and apple pie, squad commanders now have full control over the hovering drone that checks things out from a high vantage point – you can scout ahead of your team without needing to see where the drone should go. Just take the drone and move it around in real time. You can also command other vehicles with more hands-on emphasis.

The control system has been tweaked and refined, but fans of *RS: V* won't find that game's rather nifty cover system in action, since *GRAW 2* opted for the series' "run to wall and hope you stick" approach. To be honest, the *Vegas* or *Gears of War* methods would have made things easier, but *GRAW* veterans won't complain and most players will master the interface. There's not much to say beyond that: *GRAW 2* looks to be a tweaked and improved sequel to *GRAW* with not too many surprises. However, as they say: "if it ain't broke, don't fix it."

NAG

James Francis





THE GRAW 2 DEV DIARY

As part of *GRAW 2*'s marketing, Ubisoft released a five minute developer's diary explaining some of the features you can expect in the final game. Featuring Artistic Director Corrine Billon and Lead Engineer David Reizer, the duo lists some of the advances, which sound pretty awesome. There are numerous, such as a higher emphasis on a cinematic feeling in the game, as well as attention to detail to the two areas in the game: the US and Mexico. The American side of the border will not only reflect less of the destruction the fictional conflict in Mexico has wrought, but your own brain will pick up on the change thanks to different visual filters used to represent the two environments. However, what really demands attention is the technical updates. Lighting plays a big role and the diary talks about Ambient Occlusion, which renders shadows more accurately (in their depth and spread) based on the geometry (the shadow under a balcony, for example) and GOD Rays, which essentially aim to make the global light seem more realistic. Apart from the staple HDR lighting,

these are also complemented by lots of Object Translucency, which basically means light can pass through things like cloth and leaves.

GRAW 2 will also feature full day/night cycles while playing the missions. This feature is new to the game although we never saw it in action, but the demonstration footage looked really good. A weather system also adds to the deal – and more than you think. If a sand or rain storm passes over while you are playing, it will leave puddles or dust on the ground. All this, in turn, work along with the smoke system. Smoke now reacts more realistically: a helicopter landing pushes smoke columns to the side and the weather system is also likely to play a role here. However, the real enhancement to the smoke (and something we think is very cool) comes from Depth Sprites. It sounds technical, but essentially these stop smoke from clipping objects, so you don't get your suspension of belief ruined because the smoke suddenly acts like an object when it hits a wall. Or as David Reizer put it: "This is the kind of feature you won't notice when you get used it, but you'll always notice when it's not there in other games that don't have it."



GAMES WITH DRAGONS

PANZER DRAGON (1995)

In a distant oppressive future the Dark Dragon needed to be destroyed and Keil Fluge was just the man-on-a-dragon to do it. An on-rails shooter, *Panzer Dragon* had you riding an armoured dragon into combat against giant wasps and flies.

DRAKAN (1999)

Centuries ago, mankind and dragonkind fought each other and chaos was like, everywhere. Then along came Rynn, female warrior, who awoke ancient dragon Arokh and took to the skies to kick butt. *Drakan* was a cool game and riding on a dragon elevated it from average to sweet.

LAIR

WHEN LAIR WAS FIRST announced for the PS3, a game in which you control a dragon and cause draconic havoc, the reaction from Joe Gamer was pretty straightforward and usually punctuated with an expressed "Awesome!" Digging a little deeper, while developer Factor 5 hasn't exactly been that industrious (their last release was *Rogue Squadron III: Rebel Strike* for GameCube in 2003), they certainly are bringing some pedigree to the table.

Back in the days of the Amiga when games were (much older) games, Factor 5 created mega-hits such as *R-Type* (1989) and *Turrican* (1990). A little later down the timeline they released *Indiana Jones and the Infernal Machine* (2000), which wasn't that bad, but after that Factor 5 developed a *Star Wars* fetish and went all *Rogue Squadron* for three sequels.

In the present, *Lair* represents all the repressed geek daydreaming anyone who has ever read even a paragraph of fantasy has ever had, and seems only a thin thread away from being the ultimate *Dragonriders*

of *Pern* game. Taking charge, players control a knight named Rohn who belongs to an imposing super-secret society called "The Burners." Entry into this club requires one dragon to fly in combat around the continent, which is inhabited by the Asylians and the Mokai. The world itself is suffering from global warming (unlike our own problem, which superhero Al Gore is busy fighting, this global warming is caused by volcanic activity) and this is causing all sorts of disputes between the two factions, which, naturally, only several-ton fire-breathing dragons and their righteous riders can solve.

If you look at any marketing attached to *Lair*, the word most commonly found is 'voracious'. You turn the tides of war with voracious beasts, participate in voracious struggles and utilise the PlayStation 3 motion sensitive control voraciously. We can groove with that, since this is a game about controlling a dragon after all and if you peek at the screenshots around this text (as if you haven't already), it is very clear that the visuals themselves may even be, dare we say it, voracious. Personally, luscious may be a better way to describe the detailed and

gargantuan graphical feast *Lair* is shaping up to be - possibly even the most impressive game on the PlayStation 3 some may hazard to say.

Riding the dragon involves using buttons and spastic hand motions combined. Fireballs are flung with buttons, but to have your dragon stomp his feet into a ground based army, you literally have to slam down your controller. Aside from steering by tilting the controller this way and that, other motion-controlled actions include aggressively moving your controller in the direction of an enemy dragon to slam into it, or pulling back sharply to about-face. On the ground, moving the controller from side to side makes your dragon peck at enemies for a light health-regenerating snack - gruesome but appropriate.

Sadly, there is no multiplayer expected for *Lair*, although the developers have mentioned they'd be interested in revisiting the idea if a sequel to *Lair* ever comes to pass. In the meantime, however, *Lair* looks to be one to keep an eye on if Factor 5 manages to iron out the current crop of concerns, which include some framerate issues. **NAG**

Miktar "Dragon Boy" Dracon

Front

You

Jerk

The naughty bits of a dragon (wawawewaa!)



The flying bits
of a dragon

Helmet





TEENAGE MUTANT NINJA TURTLES

COWABUNGA DUDE! TURTLE POWER! Well, none of that - please. Sure, the Turtles have been around for a while, but some things should die. Nobody says 'Cowabunga' anymore; it's arguable if anyone really actually ever did. Nevertheless, the Turtles, who have been enjoying a resurgence in popularity thanks to the new animated series, are heading towards darker, grittier terrain in their upcoming movie. That means, yep, another license game to accompany said cinematic release. Obviously there should be. If anything, the world is owed another decent *Turtles* game after the lacklustre attempt Konami made in 2004.

So here we are in 2007. What has changed? For one, license games have gotten better. For another, publishers seem to have caught onto the revival fever, take an aging/struggling license and just doing something new with it. Ubisoft has been lucky in both accounts: first with the license glory that was *King Kong* and then with the timely and successful resurrection of the *Might & Magic* brand. Sneer if you must, but it's good to see that the French have their hands all over the mutants from New York.

Nothing gives you a better idea of what to expect than time spent with Beta code of the game in question. The code sent to NAG is surprisingly complete, and bar a few bugs and annoyances, appears to be the full game.

Either that or the final has a lot more in store for anyone who plays it. Judging from what was sent, *TMNT* is on its way to a major hit. Let's first bury the license animosity: *TMNT* is based on the upcoming movie, but the approach is slightly different. Granted, no one here has seen the movie yet, but the flow of the narration and levels in the game suggest that the more liberal approach of "just keep it kinda like the movie" applied. Thus, it's more of a game than a license spin-off, and a good one at that.

Tipping its hat to the NES original, *TMNT* expects players to switch between Turtles. Each of the four have special abilities, such as using a staff to vault over long distances or climbing up certain high walls using a pair of Sai. During a leap, another Turtle can also be called in to vault the active character over large gaps. Being ninjas, the Turtles are very adept at running up or across walls, jumping against vertical surfaces into opposite directions, executing perfect double jumps and performing other acrobatic feats that would make the Prince proud. Likewise, combat is simple, yet versatile and quick. Here too, the other Turtles can be brought in for combo attacks.

Graphically, the PS2 game we tested looked great and really (once again) demonstrated that the console is still in its prime. Levels are large, colourful and



COMIC POWER!

Long before the Turtles became famous as a TV show, they came to life in a one-shot comic that parodied *The New Mutants*, a Marvel comic about teenage mutant heroes (human ones), as well as a then-current Frank Miller storyline for *Daredevil* about ninja clans fighting for control of the New York underground. Much grittier and sillier than the later franchise, it was the lovechild of Kevin Eastman, who borrowed cash from his uncle and used a tax refund to print the book. It was the result of a brainstorming session with his friend Peter Laird, but real success came when a licensing agent approached the two about merchandising the Turtles. Before this, though, the Turtles were already cult icons. The one-shot quickly became a collector's item, and the bi-monthly *Tales of the Ninja Turtles* kept it going from there. This was later followed by television shows, movies, figurines, lunchboxes, underwear, etc.

intuitive, while the animations and characters are all pretty endearing. There are moments of complete frustration, and sometimes a Turtle would seem to take your commands to heart too much and end up flying off the edge of a building. However, that's nothing minor tweaking and overcoming our own impatience won't fix. **NAG**

James Francis

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MONSTER MADNESS

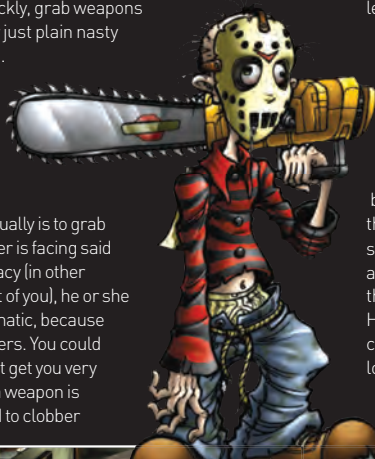
A QUICK PLOT SUMMARY: THIS geeky guy really has this crush on this Goth/emo chick in his school and his stoner/skater buddy is taunting him about this, while he fails to say the words to tell her how he feels (she's over at his house for a project or something). Then the school's sexiest girl rocks up on his doorstep, camouflaged so that no one can recognise her (duh!), and tries to convince him to do her homework. Then zombies show up and try to eat them. Ah, if that doesn't take you back to your school days, nothing will. All of this is illustrated in rather nice comic-book panels with voice-overs, speech bubbles and small animations in the static images. It's not great, but doesn't put you off the game either.

Then the game hands over control to the player and it all goes to hell in a hand basket. While these impressions are only based on Beta code, the problem that holds *Monster Madness* back is a fundamental one: the control scheme. With zombies pouring through the front door, one to four players (assuming one of the aforementioned teenagers) grab weapons and start beating the crap out of the living dead. Awesome! Well, at least in theory. There are

certain basic principles that underlie any good smash/brawl type game, the most paramount being fluidity. When you are surrounded by dozens of bad guys, you need the ability to pound them selectively, collectively and liberally at the same time with ease. In other words: hit that one, then that one, then that one trying to bite me, then the first one again and so on. Second to this is the need to react quickly, grab weapons easily and execute combos or just plain nasty attacks with relative abandon.

Finally, all of this should happen with a responsive and intelligent camera.

Monster Madness seems to fall short in all of these. The first problem that appears is how hard it actually is to grab a weapon. Unless the character is facing said object with quite a bit of accuracy (in other words, it can't be kinda in front of you), he or she won't pick it up. That's problematic, because the house is filling with monsters. You could just punch them, but that won't get you very far after a while. But let's say a weapon is in your hands and you proceed to clobber



– the actions are pretty sluggish and the attacks appear to be more in desperation than the divine act of beating up zombies and other evil creatures. Movement is equally irksome and it's tricky to manoeuvre a character in confined spaces. Even once you leave the house and head into the streets things don't really open up, and trying to both hit a monster and avoid running into level geometry is too much of a chore to be fun.

You'd hope the chaos of four players would help balance all of this, and four players are definitely more effective than one. But even here there are problems. The camera for that many players feels like it was meant for one player, causing it to move erratically as players move around the area avoiding being eaten. We managed to get further into the game this way, but then the rather pedantic spawn system got in the way. Basically, there are just too many things in *Monster Madness* that get in the way of a good monster bash. Hopefully the final game will have a much nicer control interface, but suddenly the game's looming release doesn't feel that exciting anymore. **NAG**

James Francis



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FORZA MOTORSPORT 2

HERALDED AS ONE OF the most realistic racing sims around at the time, most notably for its sophisticated damage model that realistically affected car performance, the first *Forza* game (original Xbox) was a resounding success both critically and commercially. A next-gen iteration was thus inevitable.

Forza Motorsport 2 serves up more of the same – a whole lot more. There are over 45 possible track configurations across 18 licensed real world tracks, from the Nürburgring Nordschleife's hairpin bends, to the former World War II airfields of Silverstone Circuit and Sebring Raceway, and on to the notorious corkscrew turns of the Mazda Raceway Laguna Seca and the positively suicidal Suzuka Circuit. Car junkies will be thoroughly spoiled for choice with over 300 high-octane fuel guzzlers on offer from 50 of the world's premier manufacturers, including the Enzo Ferrari, Porsche Cayman, Maserati GranSport, Renault Sport Clio, TVR Sagaris, and Lamborghini Diablo. And with all sorts of customisation options, including a staggering 4,000 user-definable design and colour layers per car, as well as a motley assortment of rims, superchargers, suspension kits, and more, pimping out your ride has never looked so cool. Then, scampering off to the recently announced Online Auction House (on Xbox Live), you can park your one-of-a-kind *chef-d'oeuvre* out on the showroom floor and bag yourself some in-game credits.

For trembling novice racers, *Forza 2* offers some neat assists like a dynamic 'suggested line' feature that will guide you along the track and hold your hand (or virtual

foot) through those tricky braking zones, stability control, antilock braking, manual or automatic gear shifting, and traction control. You're going to want to master these sorts of things because sustained damage is a big factor. Bumpers can fall off, windshields can crack, bodywork will cave in, and – horror of horrors! – your precious candy apple finish can scratch horribly. Where its predecessor's damage model allowed players to slither through catastrophic smash-ups remarkably unscathed, the sequel says no. T-bone the barrier at warp factor nine and it's game over. And with a revamped physics engine crunching 360 calculations per second, and simulation models that calculate everything from tyre pressure, weight transfer, aerodynamic load, and inertia, be assured that the driving experience is very realistic indeed.

The game has been given an ultra classy next-gen graphics overhaul, now trotting out at an impressive 60fps with 4x full screen antialiasing. The tarmac is bump mapped, and every trackside blade of grass swaying in your slipstream is an individual 3D model. Rounded out, smoothed down, and throwing lens flares hither and yon with state-of-the-art shaders, and all this awash in glorious HDR, *Forza 2* is set to stun.

In addition to a single-player 100-hour Career mode of 90 events, a *Forza Motorsport* TV component, a first-of-its-kind weekly online tournament feature, will be launched over Xbox Live. Players will be able to enrol for this in-game and post their qualifying times online, and thereafter begin clawing their way up the tournament tree to the coveted podium spots. **NAG**

Tarryn vd Byl





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ARMY OF TWO

HAVE YOU EVER WANTED to play a squad-based game where, if you screw up during a command, the next time you try it, your squad mate flips you the bird and refuses to do it? This is what *Army of Two* has in store for us. It is not so much a single-player game, but a co-op with a single-player mode built on. Strategy and accuracy are the main points in this game and work side by side. If you miss a shot that you ordered, you will have to face the consequences when your partner sees it, or, if you need something done but you haven't kept your partner happy with previous commands, he may refuse to do it. All of this is made possible by a new unique AI system called PAI.

The game also features some unique aspects in its armour class. The armour is all but invincible with a few weak points, but being able to link up with your partner and going back to back will cover those up. You will also be facing multiple groups of enemies at the same time and their difficulty level depends on you. If you play extremely well, the enemies get harder to beat, whereas, if you play poorly, they will get easier, but you might not have as much command with your teammate who will take a more active stance in the orders.

What will also be quite an interesting aspect to see is when one of the two characters is shot. The other player will have to move his teammate into a safe location in order to attend to him. Players will even have

to administer CPR to the other teammate while that teammate has to try and run away from the light.

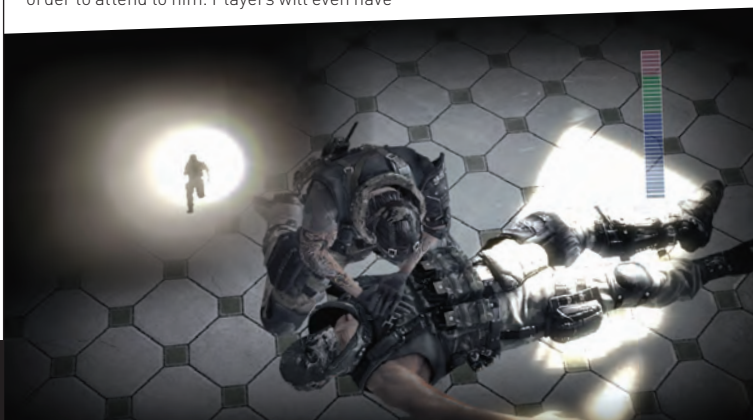
Another cool aspect is that every weapon can be uniquely customised to suit the player. This sounds wrong for the army, but these people are mercenaries, meaning they can do whatever they want. Imagine walking around with a gold-trimmed sniper rifle with a custom-made handle and all the features that you could wish for.

Army of Two also features state of the art physics, which can be seen everywhere. There is a scene where the two mercs are trapped on a sinking aircraft carrier. As it goes down, depending on the angle of descent, objects start sliding around, and we are talking not just crates and drums, but planes and anything else not attached to the deck.

The graphics are also truly awe-inspiring, with many innovations such as the level of detail of the sea while riding a boat or while rappelling down a building and seeing the landscape around you with the sun or the moon shining above. The levels are also very detailed and a new procedural generating technology was used to build them, giving the designers more time to focus on other aspects.

This is a game that will be a definite hit and will be packed with features on all fronts. **NAG**

Justin Slabbert



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We hope most of the action uses this fist-like appendage

HELLBOY

THE WORLD'S GREATEST PARANORMAL

Investigator doesn't need one of those 'I Want To Believe' posters. That's because he's the colossal red-skinned, cloven-hoofed Beast of the Apocalypse himself, sporting sawn-off horns and an enormous stone fist that's closely related to a wrecking ball. His best pal is a talking fish with an unusually formidable IQ, and his girlfriend is a somewhat unstable pyrokinetic. He was summoned from the bowels of Hell itself by the notorious (and apparently rather long-lived) mad monk, Grigori Rasputin, and a gaggle of Nazi occultists in the last gasps of World War II. He's battled vampires, werewolves, and the Baba Yaga, and is a nodding acquaintance of the King of the Daoine Sídhe. He absolutely adores kitties and has a penchant for fine cigars. Eat your hearts out, Mulder and Scully.

No doubt hoping to atone for Dreamcatcher's dismal 1994 PSone outing *Hellboy: Asylum Seeker*, Australian developer Krome is working closely with *Hellboy* comic creator Mike Mignola and film director Guillermo del Toro to produce something worthy of the Great Pancake-Quaffing One's name.

Based on an original story approved and improved by Mignola himself, the game sees its titular arch demon uncovering and foiling an appropriately diabolical plot of world domination by the fiendish Hermann von Klempt, a disembodied – but admirably ambitious – head in a jar. No need to get your brainstem on, however – most of this “uncovering and foiling” will involve making prejudicious use of Hellboy's nifty ability to smash stuff with his invulnerable Right Hand of Doom.

Much like *God of War*, *Hellboy's* visceral brawling action boasts a roster of combos that can be daisy-chained into some seriously cool limb-ripping sequences. Hellboy can grapple a goblinoid Bambini, for example, tear off his head, and hurl this *ad hoc* gore grenade back at his startled comrades. Another combo will finish the bugger off with a crunchy face plant. Once they've been pummelled into blood-spattered submission, bad guys leave behind globs of collectible red goo that fuel Hellboy's gargantuan paw, presumably powering it up and providing access to more devastating combos. The environments – including a town in medieval Japan, a ruined castle full of Nazi doomsday paraphernalia, and a rotting, haunted Eastern European village – feature all sorts of destructible items that can be used as weapons. Tired of flailing your arm around? Rip a pipe off the wall and slap that audacious machine gun-toting robotic ape in the chops. Our crimson hero also comes equipped with his trusty blunderbuss, the Samaritan, which can pop off rounds of glass and holy water, as well as an assortment of amulets, charms, herbs, and other useful esoteric scrap.

Visually, it's looking pretty hot, with some especially natty lighting effects thrown off Hellboy's radiant mitt that will conveniently rumble those pesky brats plotting insurrection in the game's ubiquitous shadowed nooks and crannies.

The game is being developed with cooperative play in mind, and includes the aforementioned, Abe Sapien and Liz Sherman, as well as a secret character from the comics as playable sidekicks. **NAG**

Tarryn van der Byl





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This is living

PLAYSTATION 3



Apparently her clothes are surprisingly practical

ENCHANTED ARMS

HISTORY TELLS US OF the cataclysmic Golem Wars a thousand years ago, when enormous Devil Golems laid brute and callous waste to the lands. There was much wailing of mortals and gnashing of automaton teeth. Then it ended. Humankind began to piece back together the stomped-on remains of their once joyful existence. Now, lurking somewhere between Yokohama City, London City, and Kyoto City, a malevolent presence is plotting to resurrect the Devil Golems, and usher in a new age of bitter discord and wanton slaughter. It's up to you, Atsuma, and your (yes!) enchanted arm to save the day. From academic probation to saviour of the universe in just 50 short hours, visible results guaranteed.

FromSoftware's latest outing, known back home by the rather bizarre name *[EM]-eNCHANT arM*, is a vanilla Japanese RPG, complete with emo hairstyles, angst, and collectible critters. In standard JRPG style, it features turn-based combat using the vaunted SpeedTactics Battle System, which allows players to move characters

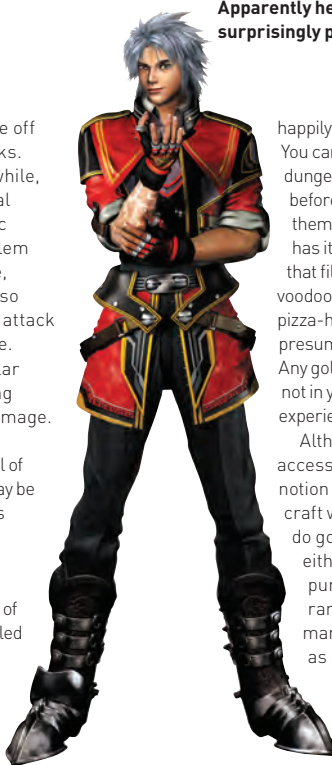
around on the battle grid, and squeeze off angle- and distance-dependent attacks. The actual exchange of blows, meanwhile, is further complicated by an elemental system that players can take strategic advantage of. Every character and golem has their own elemental affinity - Fire, Water, Wind, Earth, Light, and Dark - so cunningly using an inverse elemental attack will rack up some cool double damage. Characters hit with their own particular element, conversely will suffer nothing more than a little weak-kneed half damage.

While your golem-thumping band of intrepid adventurers does include several of Atsuma's university pals, its numbers may be considerably bolstered by over 75 golems of your very own. The materials for their construction may be purchased or looted from defeated enemies, and will vary according to the strength and complexity of the golem. Gotta craft 'em all! Once cobbled together at one of the golem workshops, your new quasi-robotic friends will sit

happily in your pockets, awaiting deployment. You can also find them lollygagging around dungeons, although you'll have to defeat them before recruiting them, or by gambling for them in the London City casinos. Each golem has its own attacks, from slinky mermaids that filch enemy hit points, and a sort of voodoo doll with a gigantic war hammer, to a pizza-headed abomination that shoots fire, presumably from its spicy jalapeño batteries. Any golems you have with you, even if they're not in your current battle party, will also gain experience and level up.

Although there are no bits of armour or accessories to equip (a somewhat abhorrent notion for Western gamers), you'll be able to craft weapons in much the same way as you do golems. You can also learn new skills, either obtaining them through battle or purchasing them from shops, and these range from improved melee and ranged manoeuvres, attack enhancements such as poison, and healing abilities. **NAG**

Tarryn vd Byl



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UNREAL TOURNAMENT 3

Of course, no one ever asks what this thing does to your wrists, no one

FINALLY, THE NEXT INSTALMENT of *Unreal Tournament* is on its way to earth's shelves, but with a slight name change. It will now be called *Unreal Tournament 3* instead of *2007* due to major advances in technology and being the first *UT* game to be released for next-gen graphics. This is also said to be the first title coming out that truly captures the abilities and strengths of the Unreal 3 engine, and after playing *Gears of War* this must be quite a feat.

The storyline this time focuses around an invasion by the Necris. It is your mission to enter the tournaments and gain humanity's freedom. There will, of course, along with the new weapons be all the usual ones that we have come to love like the flak-cannon or the shock rifle or even that link-gun that saved many vehicles and structures in its day. What players will really like about them is the fact that they have all gone back to old school style. The Dual Enforcers are back to much delight, replacing the Assault Rifles of before.

There will also be nuclear weapons, called Redeemers, and level specific weapons like the Target Painter, which will cause various hazards. With a return to its roots, *UT 3* is sure to have a greater standing with its fans, and with all new vehicles to use, this might just be the game of the year.

Some of the new additions to the vehicles include the likes of the Leviathan, a deadly vehicle that can deploy super weapons and can hold up to five people with various turrets and weapons for each. There are also the all-new Necris vehicles like the Viper, a standard land skimmer, and the Darkwalker, which looks like something from *War of the Worlds*. Then there is the Fury, which is the Necris version of an aircraft that uses tentacles to propel itself through the air. Another new addition is the Hoverboard, which looks as if it will add a whole new dimension to the game. This board allows players to zip around maps

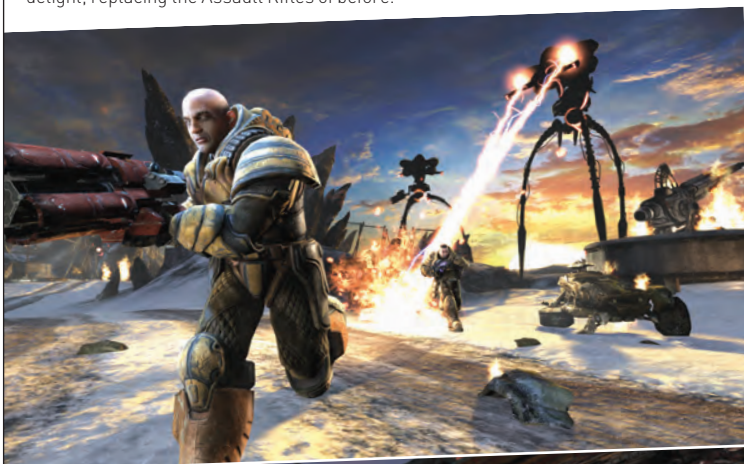
without having to find a vehicle and, from what could be seen, it looks like the Silver Surfer has come to play as well.

The types of gameplay have also been changed with a few having been taken away and replaced with the all-new Unreal Warfare. Maps for this type will essentially be three times larger than normal. There is also speculation that Warfare will have some kind of resource management built in, but this has yet to be seen.

UT 3 will also come with the new Unreal Editor, so players can create their own mods. What will also be a huge seller is the fact that any mods created on the PC can be used with the PS3 version.

Whatever *UT 3* will be, it is certain that Epic has developed yet another masterpiece that we will be waiting for on tenterhooks. **NAG**

Justin Slabbert



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The tank always held back to make Frank feel good.



FRONTLINE: FUEL OF WAR

THE SWEET, SWEET TASTE of yet another fast-paced war game is in the air because Kaos Studios, in association with THQ, will be bringing out its new title, *Frontlines: Fuel of War*. *Frontlines* makes full use of the new Unreal 3 engine and is set 20 years in the future, where the last drops of oil are running out and the world has been plunged into war once again.

The gameplay will apparently be centred on a capture the flag style scenario where the players will have to capture or destroy certain spots to advance their frontlines. By advancing your frontlines, you can unlock many different weapons and vehicles, as well as have a place to retreat to when you are almost dead.

Another interesting aspect, which differs from the usual war-based FPS titles we have come to know, is the completely non-linear levels in which the players get to do whatever they want. Whether you want to find your way through the streets or countryside or blow a hole in the nearest building to make a pathway through, it is all up to you the player.

The game is said to have over 60 different weapons and vehicles to be used as the player sees fit. Besides having plenty of weapons, the player will have drones that will be able to perform reconnaissance on areas ahead and report back on enemies that are lying in wait, thus forcing the player to adopt a stealth approach in some circumstances. It is this mixture of stealth and pure gung-ho force that

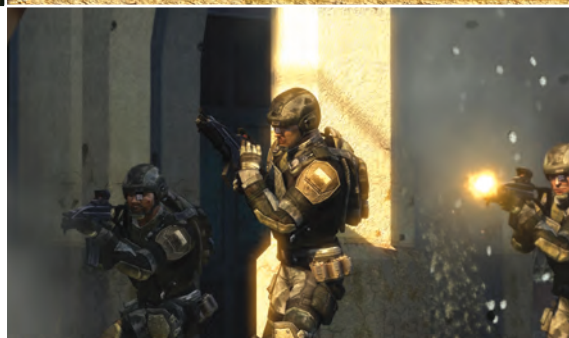
will apparently set this game apart from its peers. If you can imagine what it would be like to play a game based on both *Battlefield 2* and *Delta Force: Black Hawk Down*, you probably know what *Frontlines: Fuel of War* will be like.

There will be two major factions in the game, the Western Coalition (USA, European Union) and the Red Star Alliance (China, Russia), which will be fighting for the world's resources. These two factions will also come with various troop classes, each with different abilities, the most simple of which will be the ground support classes. There will also be various parts involving vehicles and aircraft. Wouldn't it be cool to have someone piloting a plane while you pick off vehicles with an EMP sniper rifle from the air?

Another cool aspect of the game will be the new battle chatter system, which adds realism like never before. Your squad mates will point out threats or shout for help when they need it, making them seem like real soldiers.

Frontlines: Fuel of War will be an eagerly awaited title that is set to revolutionise the way we know war-games. Say goodbye to *Battlefield* with its team-based multiplayer modes, because *Frontlines* has that and more. Say goodbye to *Call of Duty* and *Delta Force*, because *Frontlines* has incorporated all their cool aspects into one realistic war simulation. The battle will begin sometime this year.

NAG
Justin Slabbert





PlayStation 2

PSP

突击
KAH RA SHIN

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THE ELDER SCROLLS IV: THE SHIVERING ISLES

OBLIVION NEEDS NO INTRODUCTION, so let's dispense with that and scuttle straight to the tasty bits. Where *Knights of the Nine* introduced a new faction and a few scraps of new content, *Shivering Isles* is a fully featured expansion pack, offering 30+ hours of gameplay, all sorts of delightful new goodies and a whole new realm to poke around in.

Moving the interplanar shenanigans away from Mehrunes Dagon's lava-vomiting landscapes, the Shivering Isles are the digs of Sheogorath, Daedric Prince of Madness and *bona fide* fruitcake. Players who completed his quest in *Oblivion* might remember his subtle display of flaming pooches raining down from the skies. Now it seems his natural nemesis Jyggalag, the Prince of Order, is poised to unleash some sort of horrible doom upon Sheogorath's kingdom by means of a mysterious scourge known as the Greymarch. Only you can save the day!

Conveniently enough, a gateway to topsy-turvy land appears splash-bang in the middle of the Niben Bay, in the form of a rather

fetching cluster of screaming heads. A quick natter with the portal's denizen, Mr Haskill, bags you an invitation to the mad hatter's tea party, and it's straight on through the looking glass (craftily disguised as a dazzling explosion of butterflies).

The Shivering Isles (cheerfully described by Sheogorath as, "A wonderful place! Except when it's horrible!") are about a quarter the size of Cyrodiil. They're divided into two regions: zany mushroom-infested Mania and bleak Dementia, which are really just physical manifestations of Sheogorath's madness - so expect the indigenous fauna and flora to exhibit some eccentric tendencies of their own. New beasties include the amphibious Baliwog, who has the nasty ability to heal in water, the insectile Elytra, who oozes an addictive narcotic, and the Gnarl, a treant with a bothersome propensity for developing spell immunities on the fly. Moreover, bundled in, of course, is an array of new weapons for these varmints to throw themselves at. One of these is the immensely cool Dawnfang, a

sword that will guzzle souls by day, growing ever more powerful, only to be reborn at night as Duskfang, a sword that will guzzle souls by night, growing ever more powerful, only to be - you get the idea. Spell-hurlers, meanwhile, will no doubt tremble in wide-eyed and gleeful anticipation of new point-blank area-effect spells.

There are dozens of new alchemical ingredients to collect, as well as a number of weird and wonderful items to sniff out and donate to the Museum of Oddities in capital city New Sheoth, including a shrunken pygmy head, and an arm you'll find yourself. And for those sorts who knobble and hoard anything that isn't nailed down, yes, there will finally be a use for those callipers you've been hanging onto all this time.

The Xbox 360 version of the expansion throws ten new achievements into the mix, bringing the total possible number of attainable Gamerpoinits to 1,250: the first game to take advantage of the new limit prescribed by Microsoft. **NAG**

Tarryn vd Byl

Vista SideShow Now Available on Motherboards

ASUS ScreenDUO Exclusively Supports Vista SideShow for a Complete Vista Experience

ASUS is the first motherboard manufacturer to attain the Microsoft Windows Vista Premium logo as well as the one who enriches Windows Vista the most. Windows SideShow is now no longer exclusive to notebooks as ASUS introduces the world's first motherboard with Windows Sideshow support. With the innovative use of ScreenDUO, users will be able to enjoy the convenience and benefit of displaying critical PC info and syncing with the PC for email and RSS feeds.

Feature-Packed Motherboards

ASUS Vista Edition motherboard models that are designed especially for the new operating system are all packed with ASUS special features like ScreenDUO, AI Remote, AP Trigger, ASAP (ASUS Accelerated Propeller) and TPM support (Trusted Platform Module). I recently had the chance to test out these ASUS motherboards to experience what they offered in terms of Microsoft Windows Vista™ technologies.

Versatility with ScreenDUO

The innovative ScreenDUO helps provide the user with a secondary display panel - which can conveniently display important information without having to start up the PC. Often accessed functions like RSS newsfeeds, meeting schedules and synchronized information from the PC or websites can be viewed on this handy screen to save time.



Convenience at your fingertips with AI Remote

I was pleasantly surprised at the sheer amount of things I could do from the couch! Besides being able to play my favorite media files, the simple yet complete design of the AI Remote allowed me to switch the PC on/off, launch my favorite applications with the AP Trigger function, and gave me total control over AI Gear and AI Nap. These features were added on top of what I would have expected from a traditional remote for a media player.

Speedy Launches with AP Trigger

Ever wanted to start up the PC to just play a certain music file or resume working on something you were doing just a few hours before? With the ASUS AP Trigger, you can. Quickly boot or resume media and favorite pre-defined applications with just a touch of a button from this handy function.

Accelerated Performance with



ASAP (ASUS Accelerated Propeller)

With ASUS's ASAP technology, I was able to get things done faster. ASAP supports the Windows ReadyBoost™ technology - improving system performance while running under Microsoft Windows Vista™.



Protected Data with TPM support

Another useful feature that I found with these motherboards was the Trusted Platform Module (TPM) - which provided enhanced data protection, security via high-level encryptions / decryptions and platform integrity. This TPM module allows the ASUS motherboards to attain the Windows Vista BitLocker™ Drive Encryption hardware requirement - giving me a far more secure working environment. Note: The TPM module is purchased separately.



Available Models

Model	M2N32-SLI Premium Vista Edition	M2N-Plus Vista Edition	P5B Premium Vista Edition	P5B-Plus Vista Edition
CPU	AMD Athlon 64 FX	AMD Athlon 64 FX	Intel® Core™2 Quad	Intel® Core™2 Quad
Chipset	NVIDIA nForce® 590 SLI/MCP	NVIDIA nForce® 500 SLI/MCP	Intel® P965/ICH8R	Intel® P965/ICH8R
ASUS AI Lifestyle Vista Edition Features	*ScreenDUO *AI Remote *AP Trigger *TPM (optional) *ASAP	*ScreenDUO *AI Remote *AP Trigger *TPM (optional) *ASAP	*ScreenDUO *AI Remote *AP Trigger *TPM (optional) *ASAP	*AI Remote *AP Trigger *TPM (optional) *ASAP

100.00%
21.62%

WING COMMANDER ARENA

Developer→ Electronic Arts | Publisher→ Electronic Arts | Genre→ Action | Release→ Q3 2007

WE MISSED THIS, BUT apparently EA made a promise a while ago that *Wing Commander* would appear on the 360's Live Arcade service. Well, this has become true and the publisher unveiled *Wing Commander Arena* to the world recently, hoping for that *Wing Commander* magic to do its thing. At least that's our best guess: magic, because it will take some really dark arts to make fans accept the result, let alone like it. Why? Well, if you were holding out for some great human-on-Kilrathi action in your fighter cockpit, you have another thing coming. Bizarrely, the team behind *WCA* decided to make it a semi-top-down third-person shooter that resembles something between an *Asteroids* update and the flying bits of *LEGO Star Wars II*. In other words, NOTHING like the original games. Judging by the footage released, there is no first-person

view. In fact, if you withhold the name, no one would be able to even guess it's a *Wing Commander* game they are looking at.

That clearly is a problem. Usually we like to keep previews positive, because you can't be too harsh with a game that hasn't been completed for the market yet. But this cash-in by EA fully deserves the moniker of 'shameless' or EA's marketing people need to be slapped, because they showed everyone all the wrong parts of the game. Nothing of what was shown holds any real resemblance to the original series, and anyone looking forward to some classic WC dog fighting will be sourly disappointed. How can we write that about a game we haven't played yet? Take a look at the screenshots and ponder if that's what you expect from any *Wing Commander* title. **NAG**

James Francis



BOOM BOOM ROCKET

Developer→ Bizzare Creations | Publisher→ Electronic Arts | Genre→ Rhythm | Release→ Early 2007

WHILE THE NAME MIGHT induce flashbacks of the early 90's band Roxette, Bizzare knows what it is doing when it comes to casual games. An Xbox Live Arcade downloadable game, just like its previous offering, *Geometry Wars*, *Boom Boom Rocket* is by all accounts a *Dance Dance Revolution* clone, but with fireworks and you don't need a dance mat. Various colour fireworks are mapped to different buttons on the controller, and as their icons scroll towards the screen, you hit the corresponding button in time to the music as it reaches the top. Explosions lead to score multipliers and you can even unlock new firework effects. The music is always key in a title like this, and is being provided by game composer Ian Livingstone (*Batman Returns*/*Project Gotham Racing 2*). Multiplayer comes in the form of a two player battle mode (with online Live support), along with the expected leader boards to remind you of just how average a gamer you really are. Additionally, a visualiser mode will explode fireworks in time to whatever music you stream to the dashboard. Considering the success of *Geometry Wars*, there is no doubt that *Boom Boom Rocket* will follow suit. Hopefully, they'll release more music tracks for download later in the game's lifespan, although there have been no announcements made regarding this. **NAG**

Miktar Dracon



PC
PS2
PS3
PSP
XBOX
360
DS
Wii
GBA
MOB



CRAZY TAXI: FARE WARS

Developer→ Sniper Studios | Publisher→ Sega | Genre→ Racing | Release→ Winter 2007

EVER HAD THE URGE to drive around at high speeds, picking up random strangers who pay you to take them to obscure destinations in a totally unreasonable amount of time, all while dodging obstacles and negotiating traffic? Well, then you'll really love *Crazy Taxi: Fare Wars*. This latest version of the classic game on the PSP is not a totally new game, but rather direct ports of the original Dreamcast *Crazy Taxi 1* and *2* to which Sega has added some shine. New features include added lighting on the cars as well as environmental maps. Improved framerates and particle effects will no doubt create a better-looking game, while the new music and voice-overs will improve the overall experience. And if you don't like the music they provide, just use your own custom soundtrack you can upload from your memory stick.

Something the original games didn't have that the PSP version now boasts is

multiplayer. Using the *ad hoc* functions, a maximum of two players can play against each other, stealing passengers and fares from the other player, or play as a team. Two modes of play are offered in *Fare Wars*, namely a Time Trial mode, in which players must fight the clock to collect the highest fares possible, and an Arcade mode.

The mini games that kept so many fans hooked are included in this version. Players can choose to play *Crazy Box*, which features 16 originals from *Crazy Taxi*, or *Crazy Pyramid*, where players work through some *Crazy Taxi 2* mini games to unlock more.

Fan of the originals won't be disappointed. Although the game includes classic moves like the Crazy Slide and Crazy Boost, both of which add to the general madness of the title, producer Stephen Frost says fans can expect plenty of surprises. **NAG**

Megan Hughes



PC

PS2

PS3

PSP

XBOX

360

DS

Wii

GBA

MOB

FLOW

Developer→ thatgamecompany | Publisher→ SCEE | Genre→ Simulation | Release→ April 2007

ORIGINALLY RELEASED ONLINE BACK in 2006 (and still available to play at <http://intihuatani.usc.edu/cloud/flowing/>), *fIOW* is a Flash game that involves manoeuvring a tiny, aquatic little squidgy thing around, up and down the depths of the ocean, eating other little squidgy things and evolving (the latter being only a theory, of course). The game was originally made as part of a thesis its creator Jenova Chen was writing. Suffice to say, the original Flash game was stupidly popular and Sony picked it up for release on its PlayStation Store as a downloadable game for the PlayStation 3.

The PS3 version is very similar to the PC version, sporting a few advancements here and there as well as SIXAXIS motion-tilting support. Additionally, the PS3 version has six creatures you can play, each with different abilities, as well as four-player local multiplayer. Visually *fIOW* is a testament to beauty in simplicity and even manages to imply that life, even on a microscopic level, has Wagnerian scope and scale due to the spectacular reactive orchestral backtrack. At around \$8 to download, *fIOW* is exactly the type of casual game the PlayStation 3 needs. **NAG**

Miktar Dracon



PC

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BLACKSITE: AREA 51

Developer→ Midway | Publisher→ Midway | Genre→ Action | Release→ September 2007

MIDWAY HAS CREATED ANOTHER game carrying the Area 51 name, but *BlackSite: Area 51* is not a sequel. This time round, Midway has employed well-known Susan O'Connor, who worked on the *Gears of War* storyline, to write *BlackSite's* script. However, the storyline is far from rigid, allowing the moral decisions that the player makes to create their own story.

The game will start off in the middle of the war currently being fought in Iraq, where suspicious events will bring your character back to America to investigate further. The strange events seen in Iraq somehow seem to be connected to events around Groom Lake, otherwise known as Area 51. However, you won't go it alone: you'll have a team of expertly trained Special Forces men to help you find and destroy any alien threats. As their squad leader, they rely on you for guidance. If you are a poor leader, your team's morale will evaporate and they will

be overcome by fatigue and panic and find it harder to hit their targets. When morale is up, the team will work better and follow your commands quicker.

Thankfully, commanding your team around will no longer involve multiple button taps or complex menus, but rather a single tap of a button. Team members can be sent off to perform various tasks, which can be used in a strategy, or to cover you with a few cleverly placed snipers.

Another great feature that *BlackSite* has to offer is the mostly destructible scenery, with the results of any battles with the Reborn, the name given to the alien beings, being visible. The visually appealing levels can be played alone or cooperatively with two players. The online multiplayer option offers a choice of typical modes, like Death-Match, or the new Human vs. Reborn and Siege modes. **NAG**

Megan Hughes



WAR FRONT: TURNING POINT

Developer→ Digital Reality | Publisher→ Atari | Genre→ Strategy | Release→ April 2007

IMAGINE WHAT IT WOULD have been like if Hitler had been assassinated early on during the war. Would the Germans just have said sorry and quit, or would they have persevered and fought for the world that Hitler dreamed of? Virtual Reality Studios tries to answer these questions with its upcoming title, *War Front: Turning Point*.

The story begins during the war where Hitler is indeed assassinated, but the allies will not let Germany off the hook. Therefore, the war continues. However, with better generals in charge of the German army than Hitler, it quickly turns the battle into a stalemate with England having already fallen. Throughout the war, there were also many research projects underway for new weapons, and the game developers take full advantage of that to show what could have happened if these weapons came into being.

The gameplay itself is said to be similar to *Command and Conquer* with various factions, each with over a hundred different units. These factions include the USA, Russia and Germany, each with many unique and specialised weapons that will add great depth for the diehard strategy buffs out there. And of course, there will be atomic bombs, jets, burrowing APCs, ice tanks that freeze everything in sight, and there will even be energy shields to deploy.

Hero units will be added for all those specialised tasks, such as converting units or going berserk in the battlefield. Each side will have three of these heroes, and it is rumoured



that these heroes will be near invincible.

War Front: Turning Point is set to hit shelves soon, and if the developers get their way, there will be a new era dawning in the RTS genre, which we will all be awaiting. **NAG**

Justin Slabbert



PC

PS2

PS3

PSP

XBOX

360

DS

Wii

GBA

MOB

PC

PS2

PS3

PSP

XBOX

360

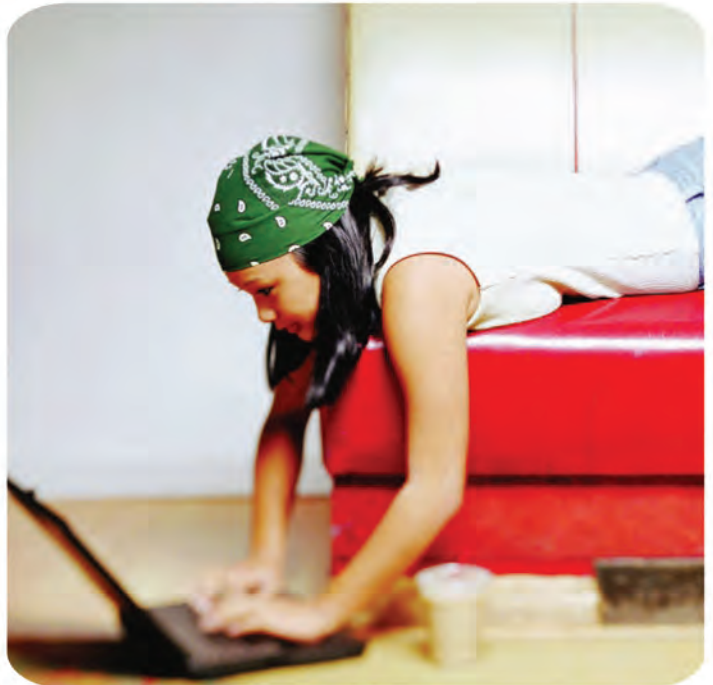
DS

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THE TIBERIUM WARS

Just as is the case with movies, game franchises often suffer from the all-too-common malady of the sequel, and serialisation. It is easier to cash in on an existing concept than to come up with a new setting and story. Often, this results in unoriginal and 'rehashed' material that catches the audience's attention for a while, and then fades. On the other hand, sometimes a franchise is worth returning to, sometimes even more than once - especially if it doesn't happen too frequently...

SUCH HAS BEEN THE story of, for example, *Warcraft*, with Blizzard being wise to not return to a campaign setting too soon after its last offering, as this would have the two-fold effect of damaging the previous instalment's longevity, and bombarding players with too much of the same fare. Whether Electronic Arts deliberately waited so long to release *Command & Conquer 3: Tiberium Wars*, or whether this was more the accidental result of circumstance, returning to Tiberium-infested Earth after so many years is a welcome foray indeed!

Command & Conquer 3: Tiberium Wars picks up some years after events in *Command & Conquer 2: Tiberian Sun*. Although the Firestorm expansion pack did much for the game, opinions about the game had already been formed, and the game ended up relegated to ignominy. With *Command & Conquer: Generals*, Electronic Arts tried a different tack: one that worked out moderately well, and more importantly, provided a new game engine for future offerings.

WELCOME BACK, COMMANDER!

Tiberium Wars marks the very welcome return to live-acted video sequences, which are used to provide briefing information and to further the in-game story. These videos enjoy a fairly high-profile cast, with two stars of the TV show *Battlestar Galactica*, one from *Lost*, and other actors including the inimitable Michael Ironside (best known

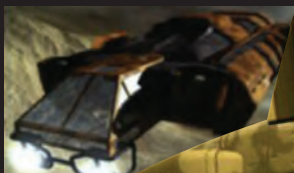
for his role in *Starship Troopers*) assuming the personas of various Global Defense Initiative and Brotherhood of Nod personnel. As before, while great to watch, these videos have a slightly over-the-top, even cheesy feel, making for a very entertaining romp that is somewhat above B-grade. Speaking of B-grade, the setting has taken a more sci-fi angle than its predecessors had (though *Tiberian Sun* was definitely already pointing in this direction.) Decades have passed, and the influence of Tiberium, combined with mankind's natural ingenuity when it comes to find ways to kill fellow humans, have conspired to give rise to a slew of new and futuristic weapons.

In keeping with modern gaming conventions, infantry units are no longer depicted singly, but rather in squads. In fact, this has always been the case in an abstract, symbolic way. Single infantry unit graphics were supposed to represent several actual troopers. This new representation, made possible by today's more powerful computers, results in a more realistic depiction, and adds authenticity because different squad types are made up of varying numbers of members. Rifleman squads, for example, contain five soldiers, while rocket infantry squads consist of two. A side effect of the squad approach is that it is somewhat harder for an infantry unit to get out of the way of a tank with hit-and-run intentions!

NOT SAFE FROM TERRORISM - OR CENSORSHIP!

The German version of *Command & Conquer 3* displays Nod fanatics differently to other versions. Instead of depicting these terrorists as suicide bombers, in this version they will run up to their target, drop off their hot wares, and then scuttle off to safety. The change doesn't affect how the unit plays, and is merely a different animation.





DECADES OF CONFLICT

The epic story of Tiberium has been going on for over a decade to date:

- **1995 - Command & Conquer**, also referred to as *Tiberian Dawn*. This is where it all began, and a milestone was reached in the real-time strategy genre.
- **1996 - The Covert Operations** presented new, more challenging missions, and some new multiplayer maps.
- **1997 - Sole Survivor**. This obscure, little-known title was multiplayer-only, mostly online, and had players assuming the roles of individual units, running around looking for upgrade crates. Every-man-for-himself and team modes were available.
- **1998 - Command & Conquer: Tiberian Sun** was the proper sequel to *Tiberian Dawn*, and introduced a more sci-fi feel, as well as developing the story more deeply. A slightly different video narrative style was employed - one that presented the player's persona as an on-screen character.
- **2000 - Firestorm** was the expansion pack, and to honest, it added some features to the game that made it feel more complete. Unfortunately, by this time the game was already fairly outdated.
- **2002 - Renegade** represented a departure from the RTS mould, while furthering the *Tiberian* storyline. Players assumed the role of a GDI commando. The game introduced some innovations to the first-person shooter genre, such as the ability to commander vehicles and to interact with base structures such as those found in the RTS titles.
- **2007 - Command & Conquer 3: Tiberian Wars** is now! This is why you are reading this, and probably the review, too.



WMD

Weapons of mass destruction, or super weapons as they are generally referred to by real-time strategy gamers, have always played a major role in the *Command & Conquer* franchise. The original game featured two: GDI's Particle Cannon, and Nod's Nuclear Missile. Both were limited to one facility per player at any given time (unless a player happened to capture an opponent's super weapon), but this restriction was later lifted in the *Red Alert* series and in *Generals*. However, players were given the option, in multiplayer games, to limit super weapons to one per player. In the second *Tiberium War* (ie. in *Tiberian Sun*) Nod no longer

had nuclear capability, but instead fired high-yield conventional cluster missiles, as well as a Tiberium chemical warhead. GDI still used the Ion Cannon, as well as being able to defend areas with the Firestorm energy curtain, which blocked all attacks. *Tiberium Wars* sees a return of Nod's nuclear arsenal. The Ion Cannon is also more powerful than it previously was, but now requires as long to charge up as the nuke. Nod also has access to the Catalyst Missile, which detonates refined Tiberium. While it's essentially useless against most targets, it is guaranteed to destroy refineries, silos and Tiberium-upgraded Nod power plants. GDI's Ion Cannon

is now supplemented by the Space Command, which allows its controller to periodically deploy three squads of Zone Troopers (very powerful!) anywhere on the battlefield.

Enter the Scrin. The alien race that is originally responsible for seeding Earth with Tiberium (or 'ichor' as they call it) can open a rift anywhere on the map, much like a small black hole, which sucks in matter and damages what it comprises. The Scrin's other super weapon is a super-unit, the Mothership, which travels very slowly, but can withstand a considerable beating and unleashes a devastating weapon upon ground targets.

ION CANNON



NUCLEAR STRIKE



RIFT





TRADEMARK TACTICS

Ever since the original game that sparked the Tiberium madness, some tried and tested tactics have remained a staple of multiplayer matches. Although *Tiberian Sun* had less of these, due to the game's departure from original mainstays, *Tiberian Wars*' return to the *Command & Conquer* roots heralds the resumption of such combat tricks.

ENGINEERING!

A popular trick of GDI was loading some engineers into an APC, driving them right into the opponent's base, ejecting them from their vehicle and taking over key structures, most notably the construction yard and, whenever possible, barracks. Executed very early, this tactic could spell the opponent's doom right there and then, denying the player the ability to develop his or her base. Only a single engineer can now occupy an APC in *C&C3*, so usually at least two such vehicles are required, meaning that the opponent has a bit more time to build a defence. Nevertheless, an unprepared opponent can just as easily be caught out by this trick, resulting in a very short game indeed! Therefore, a word of warning: make sure you have some anti-infantry defences in place at the heart of your base!

SNEAKY-SNEAKY, LIKE!

Nod's stealth tank was a formidable unit. While it was quite fragile, it packed a heavy punch, could drive over infantry, could shoot down aircraft and was usually invisible to opponents. This meant that it was possible to sneak some into the back of an opponent's base, and then unleash them while that opponent's attention was elsewhere (on a frontal assault, for example) to cripple the base by taking out key structures (power, economy, construction yard, for example). Even though the latest title offers better ways to spot cloaked units, it is still possible for the canny player to take advantage of the stealth tank's evasiveness. By keeping a group of stealth tanks off the natural paths between destinations and keeping them in the 'hold fire' stance, enemy columns can be allowed to move right past, and then a surgical strike can be executed on the now-unprotected rear.

HARVESTER HUNTING

Some play groups enforced 'harvester truces', a practice that became so popular that Westwood even introduced a harvester truce option in some of its *Command & Conquer* titles. However, more competitive players always scoffed at this practice – ultimately, undermining an opponent's economy is one of the most effective ways to stymie their development. To this end, Nod attack bikes and aircraft of various kinds were popular for hunting harvesters. Nod traditionally had the edge in this department, both due to its powerful bikes and the ability to ambush harvesters by leaving stealth tanks lurking in a Tiberium field. This tactic is still very viable, and now each faction has its own effective units to carry it out with.



SANTA IS COMING TO TOWN!

The GDI Commando from the original *Command & Conquer* is a signature unit that anyone who played the game remembers fondly for his grim sense of humour. His one-shot kills were usually accompanied by his trademark boast of "That was left-handed," for instance, and when ordered to set a demolition charge on a building, he would announce, "I've got a present for you!" This latter theme has been revisited in *Tiberian Wars*, with the wisecracking super-soldier now boasting a repertoire of gifting-themed one-liners, all hinting at what a good guy he is for not forgetting anyone in the holiday season!



A feature that was present in earlier *Command & Conquer* titles, but which is now absent, is the ability to build walls. The likely motivation behind leaving this out is probably to maintain the pace of the game, but nevertheless, it will be missed by some, particularly some players who enjoyed building strong defences. In *Tiberian Dawn*, walls were actually more or less indispensable to fend off stealth tank intrusions, because narrow entryways could be left for harvesters and friendly units, guarded by defensive turrets, which could immediately spot cloaked units adjacent to them. The improved new methods for spotting stealth at least compensate for this particular loss in functionality. While on the topic of missing items, it is sad that *Tiberian Wars* features no Tiberium Garden multiplayer map, which was a favourite in the original game. Hopefully it will be

released in a patch, but regardless, odds are that the fan community will produce one soon.

Lastly, the control interface bears looking at. *Command & Conquer: Red Alert 2* introduced an interesting enhancement to the side command bar: category tabs. This allowed players to select a building or unit class to order from, and each of these tabs could support its own production queue. *Tiberian Wars* expands on this idea by providing these tabs, and sub-tabs for individual production facilities of a type. Therefore, two construction yards will each have their own sub-tab in the buildings and support structures tabs, and the same applies to war factories and barracks. This evolved control interface, along with planning mode and some other innovations, should satisfy the more sophisticated requirements of modern strategy gamers. **NAG**

CRACKDOWN

REALTIME



WORLDS

ISSUE 1

\$2.50



BRING THAT BEAT BACK

A Supercop, that's what you are in *Crackdown*. From the mind that brought us *Lemmings* and *Grand Theft Auto* comes a game in which your entire goal is to be totally badass and throw cars at buildings. In *Crackdown*, you will shoot stuff, throw stuff and jump over stuff. The more you do these things, the better you get at shooting, jumping and throwing stuff. Daunting, we know. So sit back, and let us illuminate a few things before you go out there and use your Supercop rocket launcher to sweep the streets clean of crime, filth and innocent bystanders.

CLEANING UP THE CITY

THE AGENCY

Enforcers of justice and peace in Pacific City. The Agency is all about guns, cops and cop cars. However, recently things have gotten a little out of hand and that is where you come in. Unable to cope with the crime that's been tearing Pacific City apart, the Agency has pumped money into a brand new Tool of Justice - you. You are a collection of genes and science, turning you into a very expensive and powerful weapon. As an Agent, your job is to clean up the city, enforcing the law while trying not to get yourself killed. But if you do, no worries - clones have been created and you'll download into a new body with all your experience, ready to go out there and kick those that killed you to death.

THE GANGS

LOS MUERTOS

Starting small with drug dealing, the Los Muertos gang has quickly grown into a huge narcotics operation that dominates the two islands on the east side of Pacific City. These bastards are vehicle specialists and customise the finest rides into pimping crime getaways.

THE VOLK

Tired of low pay and no props, these hardcore militia from all over Eastern Europe banded together and formed The Volk: an organised crime ring with a strong work ethic and funny accents. Experts in firearms and explosives, they bolster their own with skilled illegal immigrants specially imported. The entire industrial area is under their control, and that just sucks.

THE SHAI-GEN CORPORATION

So sinister and evil you'll have to wash with goodness just for reading this, the Shai-Gen Corporation was founded and funded by the previous government in an attempt to evolve radical pre-emptive defence solutions. Mutants, basically. They make mutants and the Agency thinks this isn't a good thing. Shai-Gen is all about intensive scientific research, strategic influence initiatives and black propaganda. Don't let them have their way. Go over to the lavish eastern-styled part of the city and remind them what pain feels like. You'll feel better once you did.





SERIOUS SKILLZ

To do what you need to do, Agent, you're gonna have to develop some mad skillz. Thankfully, the Agency spared no expense and fitted you with some sweet bio-armour that regenerates as long as you're not shot, as well as upgradeable skills that get better as you use them. So be sure to use them, and you'll find yourself stronger, faster and more capable of hitting a gang member with a car from 400m away. Each of the five skills can be improved until you reach four stars, Agent, and are well worth your effort if you're going to take down the Kingpins. Skills for Kills, Agent. Skills for Kills.

AGILITY

Improving your agility is just a matter of jumping around, but the Agency felt that made things too easy and spent an extra five billion dollars placing green glowing agility orbs around the city in precarious places. To reach them, you'll have to climb up buildings, fall off buildings while swearing and even jump from rooftop to rooftop. As your agility improves, so will your looks, but mostly just your face. Your hair will get longer, and you'll magically get piercings. Improving your agility means you can run faster and jump much higher, which is perfect for either getting out of the way of a firefight, or just to collect more agility orbs. A neat trick: if you shoot enemies from high up, you'll also gain some agility. Rooftop races also get you agility and involve running and jumping from marker to marker, trying to reach the end before your time is up. Don't worry about the explosive crime - it will wait for you if you feel like taking a break and grabbing some agility experience.

DRIVING

As you drive around, over gang members or through stunt markers, you'll improve your driving, which in turn increases your control over all the vehicles in the game. You also get driving experience by completing races or flipping your car after driving over a ramp. Special Agency vehicles give you extra control as you level up - the SUV can climb walls at four stars and the Supercar turns into the frikken Batmobile, complete with dual machineguns at max level. Getting into an Agency car will actually transform that car several times depending on your level, with

cool morphing and a special whoosh-boom at the end just so you know who's the man. And that man is you - if you level your driving up all the way.

EXPLOSIVES

This one is a no-brainer, Agent. The more you blow shit up, the better you get at blowing shit up. Grenades and rocket launchers work well for this task, and as you improve in explosives, you'll be doing more damage with more force over a larger area. Your grenades go from pop rocks to atom bombs and it feels good. Be sure to make use of all the explosives just driving around the streets. Sure, people call them cars, but in reality, they're just fireworks waiting to happen.

STRENGTH

Gun-whip and kick your way to a healthier, stronger you. The more you kick ass, the stronger your kick gets and you even get taller. The higher your strength, the more armour you get up to a total of four extra health bars at level four. The stronger you are, the farther you can throw an object and you can pick up heavier objects. A great way to help a buddy Agent reach a difficult place is to have them get in a car, pick it up and throw it with them in it. It feels good to help your fellow men, but the Agency will forgive you if you throw them into the river. At higher levels, you can roundhouse kick a truck so that it back-flips. How awesome is that? That's how you fight crime.

FIREARMS

While you may think firearms involve pouring petrol over your hands and shouting "Flame On" as you thrust them into a fire, it actually has to do with how proficient you are at shooting a gun. Yeah, we were also a bit disappointed. As you improve at firearms by shooting things, you'll increase the damage you do with all non-explosive firearms. Higher levels yield improved targeting speed, letting you quickly lock onto an enemy, shift aim at the head and pop them with a bullet, all while picking your nose in the fraction of a second. Improved firearms also let you zoom in closer with the sniper rifles so you can see the whites of their eyes before shooting one out.



THE BUDDY SYSTEM

Fighting crime alone sucks, even Batman couldn't do it and eventually hired himself that boy, Robin, was it? Anyway, don't go at it alone, bring a friend! Another Agent can jump right into your game if you invite them or if they spot you playing and request to join you. Their objectives will be your objectives, even if they've already killed the Kingpin you're after. That's the power of videogame voodoo. If you know someone who is a better driver than you, get them into your game and let them drive while you car-surf and shoot out the tyres of other cars, watching them skid, flip and crash into a crowd of people. But try to take out some bad guys in the process too, or the cops will get annoyed at you and call your mom. Two-player cooperative saves lives, and if you find yourself in peril, a well-placed buddy can save your ass. Thankfully, your HUD will show you where your buddy is, and you can even race against each other in both rooftop and road races if both of you choose to run.



WEAPONS OF MASS DISTRACTION

An Agent is only as good as his guns, and of course, the bad guys always have better guns. Nothing stops you from taking their guns, though. Kick some ass and increase your arsenal with weapons - you'll need them.

WATSON HE99-X "FIREFLY"

This baby is a must-have for any self-respecting Agent who appreciates a good homing-missile launcher. The FireFly comes with enough ammo to cause a real traffic jam, and rockets will automatically home in on your locked-on target. For extra fun, try juggling a gang member in the air with the FireFly for an Achievement.

HARLINGTON HMG-90

As far as heavy machineguns go, the HMG-90 is a crowd-pleaser. With its rapid rate of fire and armour-penetrating rounds, use this weapon to carve yourself a path into a boss compound and go say hello with a smile.

BASTION SX900 "LONGSHOT"

No reason to put yourself in danger all the time, and the LongShot lets you comfortably take out enemies from far away. Zoom in, pick your target and let rip with a high-acceleration slug that gives bad guys a new hole to breathe through. The LongShot is also the weapon of choice for shooting out car tyres on the highway, although the Agency frowns on recreational hobbies such as this. **NAG**





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PlayStation.2

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WHAT WE'RE PLAYING

RESISTANCE: FALL OF MAN [PS3]

We expected something a bit more charismatic from developer Insomniac, but regardless, *Resistance* is a decent enough FPS from the looks of it, and visually quite stunning. We have a PS3 on loan and every time someone goes to play *Resistance*, most of the office stops to go look. We can't decide if that's just because it's new and interesting, or if it's because the game rocks.

COMMAND & CONQUER 3 [PC]

If *Supreme Commander* is like a piece of sweeping complex Wagnerian classical music that rises and falls, then *Command & Conquer 3* is a heavy-metal rock ballad with a constant drumbeat that demands you to constantly pay attention. Yeah, we're poetic that way. The *C&C 3* demo with its cut-scenes certainly managed to get us paying attention, and the all-star cast certainly doesn't hurt. But dammit, she's a Cylon! Run commander!

ALIEN HOMINID HD [XBLA]

The little yellow alien that stole and ate our hearts is back, but in glorious high-resolution and with online cooperative play. Stating that *Alien Hominid* is difficult is a gross understatement: the game requires you to sell your soul just to pass the first level. Nevertheless, we love punishment and gladly take what *Alien Hominid* dishes out - all just to collect those addictive Achievements.

CRACKDOWN [360]

We've finished *Crackdown* and reached max level in all the skills, but chasing down those elusive little Agility and Secret orbs is proving to be quite the challenge. Instead, our favourite way to while away a few hours is to hook up with a friend online and shoot out car tires on the highway. Watching cars skid, turn and flip over the median into oncoming traffic sooths the soul. Don't let Jack Thompson find out we're doing this.

THE 11TH HOUR [PC]

The *7th Guest* & *11th Hour* box suddenly found its way to us and we couldn't resist installing Trilobyte's ancient FMV masterpiece. Sadly, *The 7th Guest* CDs were missing, but we actually managed to get *The 11th Hour* to install and run under DOSBox in Vista. The cut-scenes are so silly and the acting made us laugh, but the intricate and devilish puzzles, along with the super-scary ghostly hallways of the mansion, reminded us why we liked *The 11th Hour* in the first place.



WEB SCORES

ARMED ASSAULT

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FINAL FANTASY XII

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GHOST RIDER

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098



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THE REVIEWERS

Hand picked from the finest batch of monkey-clones this side of an embryonic hydration vat, NAG allows only the best to touch videogames in ways they were never meant to be touched.

Miktar Dracon

Affectionately known as BowserBait, this clone shows promise if only it would stop playing crappy indie games.



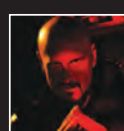
James Francis

Part man, part goat, we let James occasionally look at games if it promises to be good.



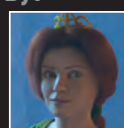
Alex Jelagin

We picked this clone out of the vat due to its RTS skizzles and serious micromanagement action.



Tarryn van der Byl

Some guy was like, do you want Tarryn for free, and we were all like, sure. Free, dude.



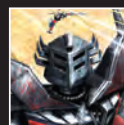
Ryan Kalis

We're thinking of upgrading this clone from trial to full-feature, but we can't afford the serial code.



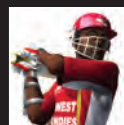
Toby Hudon

After removing Toby from the vat because it didn't play well with others, we just couldn't let go.



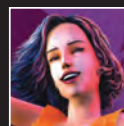
Eddie Francis

Second time seems to be the charm for this gene pool, and Eddie shows much promise.



Megan Hughes

Almost thrown back due to being under the size limit, we feed Megan games involving Sims.



Michael James

This hand-me-down has a lot of mileage on the clock, but we think we can get more use out of it.



SUPREME COMMANDER



NAG	88
METACRITIC	87
GAMERANKINGS	87

COMMAND & CONQUER 3



NAG	xxx
METACRITIC	NA
GAMERANKINGS	90

HEROES OF ANNIHILATED EMPIRES



NAG	61
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mmmmmm ... SHINY!

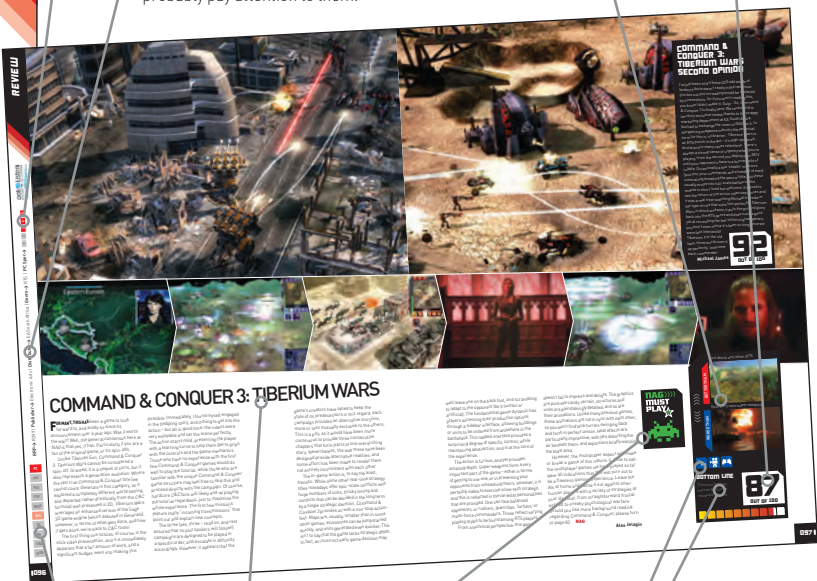
A quick guide to the new NAG redesign

PC SPEC: Will this game rape your machine, or make it fly? Check the box at the bottom right for an explanation on our new fancy hardware rating system.

BETTER THAN/WORSE THAN: Everything is relative, right? Because of that, we keep making comparisons between games in this space, and try to be funny about it.

SCORE: You only care about this number, we know that. But try to pretend you read the reviews because they're so insightful and informative. Thank you, we love you.

VITAL INFO: A game can't survive without these vitals, so you should probably pay attention to them.



PLATFORMS: The brightest block is the platform on which the game was reviewed. Dimmer blocks are platforms on which the game also appears. Simple.

AWARDS: You won't find these NAG awards, given to games of merit, anywhere but in NAG. Truth.

GAME NAME: This is the important bit, and you might want to write it down somewhere just in case you need it later.

BOTTOM LINE: It all comes down to this, and the words written here will shape the future, moulding it towards gaming excellence.

ICONS: Check the list on the right for our new frikkin' sweet icons, distilling the essence of games even further, just for you.

DISTRIBUTOR LIST

For your convenience, the numbers of the distribution companies

Aleet Distribution	[011] 888-8916	Legend Memory	[011] 314-0817
Apex International	[012] 347-9956	Logitech SA	[011] 656-3375
Asbis	[011] 848 7000	Look & Listen	[011] 467-3717
Asus SA	[011] 783-5450	Megarom	[011] 234-2680
Axiz	[011] 237-7000	Microsoft	[011] 265-3000
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CORRECTION

In the March issue, the prices for Microsoft budget games should have been R99

THE REVIEW ICONS

The NAG review icons aim to help you get a better idea of what a game is like, while giving us less work to do in the review. Everyone wins, so best memorise this list below and look out for them in the Review score box.

- ACTION:** When you gotta blast, smash, crash and mash your way to victory, it's Action.
- BABYSITTING:** Put the kids to bed, you gotta Babysit this game to make it love you.
- BITCHIN':** When a game just plain rocks despite everything, then it is worthy of the Bitchin'.
- BUGGY:** Truth be told, there is just no excusing a Buggy game because games aren't cheap.
- CASH-IN/LICENSE:** Some companies totally Cash-in on License games, good or bad.
- CINEMATIC:** Sweet-ass cutscenes, dramatic camerawork and awesome scenes are Cinematic.
- CLONE:** We've seen it before and we'll see it again, because people always Clone good stuff.
- COMPETITIVE:** You don't think Ranked Match is a feature, you think it should be mandatory.
- FOREIGN:** No clue what the game is about or even what is said? Confusing plot? Careful, it might be Foreign!
- ONLINE:** For games that play well with others and generally mean playing with others, Online.
- PARTY:** Get some friends and move the couch, Party games are frikkin' sweet.
- STUPID PEOPLE:** Don't worry little buddy, this game holds your hand like a friend.
- ALL AGES:** These games contain no violence, immoral acts or anything that might narrow the demographic, but it may still be difficult.
- KID FRIENDLY:** Kids can play this game without needing an adult every five minutes to explain to them what button to press.
- 16+ RESTRICTION:** If you're 16 or over, you are well within your rights to play this game.
- 18+ RESTRICTION:** If you are not yet 18, please put down this game and back away slowly before the police come and arrest you.
- MULTIPLAYER:** The number on the controller icon indicates the maximum number of people who can play at once.

WILL IT RUN? - PC GAME SPECS

PC game specs are a pain for us, because we need to list them for those people who don't consult the box before buying a game. Instead the reviews will now have a nice number ranking on the side. Higher numbers mean a game is more machine intensive. If a game has all the numbers lit up, it'll run on a 5-year-old piece of junk up to the most bad-ass of machines.

- Your machine has a DirectX 10 graphics card, a Dual Core or higher CPU and 2GB or more RAM. You are the centre of gaming-fu. This game will honour your investment. **[DX10 graphics card; dual-core CPU; 2GB+ RAM]**
- Your graphics card has a respectable 256MB of memory and your CPU sits at the higher end of 2GHz, backed by 1-2GB of RAM. A worthy rig for a worthy game. **[256MB graphics card with DX9; 2GHz or more; 1-2GB RAM]**
- Your card sits between 128 and 256MB of RAM with at least DirectX 8 support, while your 2GB Pentium 4 churns happily with between 512MB and 1GB of RAM. We assume you're slowly saving for an upgrade. **[256MB+ graphics card with DX8; 2GHz Pentium 4; 512MB-1GB RAM]**
- Okay, so you have a graphics card that falls below the 128MB memory point but supports DX8, a chip that you can't call 2GHz even if you wanted and you have 256MB or less RAM. Your PC might be getting more Office action than you'd like to admit. **[128MB or lower graphics card with DX8; Below 2GHz chip; 256MB or lower RAM]**
- You really don't think about your PC specs much. In fact, any hint of upgrade money is spent on something more practical, like a coffee maker with a timer. Fresh coffee first thing in the morning always beats playing games. **[Can run XP, will play game]**

WELCOME TO THE TURNING POINT OF HISTORY!



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COMMAND & CONQUER 3: TIBERIUM WARS

FOR MANY, THIS HAS been a game to look forward to, and avidly so since its announcement over a year ago. Was it worth the wait? Well, the general consensus here at NAG is that yes, it has. Particularly if you are a fan of the original game, or its spin-offs.

Unlike *Tiberian Sun*, *Command & Conquer 3: Tiberium Wars* cannot be considered a spin-off. Granted, it is a sequel of sorts, but it also represents a generation evolution. Where the last true *Command & Conquer* title (we cannot count *Generals* in this category, as it explored a completely different world setting, and departed rather drastically from the *C&C* formula) was presented in 2D, *Tiberium Wars* leverages an enhanced version of the Sage 3D game engine (which debuted in *Generals*). However, in terms of what gets done, and how it gets done, we're back to *C&C* roots!

The first thing one notices, of course, is the slick video presentation, and it is immediately apparent that a fair amount of work, and a significant budget, went into making this

possible. Immediately, I found myself engaged in the fledgling story, and itching to get into the action – but all in good time: the videos were very enjoyable and set the scene perfectly. The action starts mild, presenting the player with a learning curve to help them get to grips with the controls and the game mechanics. Those who have no experience with the first few *Command & Conquer* games would do well to play the tutorial, while those who are familiar with the unique *Command & Conquer* game structure may feel free to skip this and proceed directly with the campaign. Of course, hardcore *C&C* fans will likely end up playing the tutorial regardless, just to maximise the whole experience. The first few missions feature many “incoming transmissions” that point out and explain new concepts.

The three (yes, three – read on, and rest assured that no plot spoilers will follow!) campaigns are designed to be played in a specific order, and escalate in difficulty accordingly. However, it appears that the

game's creators have opted to keep the style of its predecessors in this regard: each campaign provides an alternative storyline, more or less mutually exclusive to the others. This is a pity, as it would have been more continuous to provide three consecutive chapters that form parts of one overarching story. Nevertheless, the way these have been designed provide alternative realities, and some effort has been made to render them not entirely inconsistent with each other.

The in-game action is, to say the least, frenetic. While some other real-time strategy titles nowadays offer epic-scale conflicts with huge numbers of units, finicky timing and conflicts that can be decided in the long term by a single strategic decision, *Command & Conquer 3* provides us with a non-stop action-fest. Maps are, usually, smaller than in some other games, economies can be jumpstarted quickly, and units generated even quicker. This isn't to say that the game lacks strategic depth. In fact, an incorrect early game decision may



COMMAND & CONQUER 3: TIBERIUM WARS SECOND OPINION

I've just been told if these 200 odd words of fanboy tribute wasn't ready in the next hour, this box out you're reading would be replaced by screenshots. So if you aren't reading this, you know I didn't make it. Gulp. So, *Command & Conquer 3* is finally here. We received this territory exclusive review thanks to the snappy marketing department at EA South Africa, but had to exchange the cover of *NAG* for it. In the gaming magazine industry the technical term for this is 'no brainer'. *Tiberium Wars* is an RTS punch in the gut – it's high-powered, brutal and in many cases relentless. There's always a strong sense of urgency when you're playing, from the second you deploy your MCV until your opponent's base is a burning pile of rubble. Occasionally a few 'stealth' missions [just you, your commando and a handful of men] come along breaking the pace a little, but these usually evolve into full-scale battles so the respite is short-lived but welcome. It's good to see the return of live action video sequences and it was a real treat watching Michael Ironside in the type of role that suits him perfectly. *Tiberium Wars* is shock and awe; it puts the grit and glory back into the RTS genre and does such a good job at recreating the feel of the original games, you won't even notice it's been so long since we were last infected by Tiberium. For the old fans, three words sum it up perfectly, 'welcome back commander'

Michael James

92
OUT OF 100



well leave one on the back foot, and scrambling to adapt to the opponent (be it human or artificial). The fundamental game dynamic has players accessing their production options through a sidebar interface, allowing buildings or units to be ordered from anywhere in the battlefield. This tabbed interface provides a surprising degree of specific control, while maintaining abstraction, and is at the core of the experience.

The action is furious, and yet provides amazing depth. Super weapons form a very important part of the game – either in terms of getting to use one, or in preventing your opponents from unleashing theirs. However, it is perfectly viable to exercise a low-tech strategy, and this is reflected in the varied AI personalities that are provided. One can face balanced opponents, or rushers, guerrillas, 'turtlers' or mass-force commanders. These reflect varying playing styles to be found among RTS players.

From a technical perspective, this game

doesn't fail to impress and delight. The graphics are pure eye candy: terrain, structures and units are painstakingly detailed, and so are their animations. Unlike many previous games, these animations are not in sync with each other, so you won't find tank turrets swinging back and forth in perfect unison. Heat effects are particularly impressive, with jets distorting the air beneath them, and explosions briefly warping the blast area.

However, the multiplayer aspect will make or break a game of this nature. Suffice to say, the multiplayer games we have played so far gave all indications that this will turn out to be a flawless gaming experience. Leave the AIs at home and battle it out against other human players with a variety of strategies at your disposal, from straightforward frontal assault to sneaky psychological warfare. Should you like more background reading regarding *Command & Conquer*, please turn to page 82. **NAG**

Alex Jelagin



Just about any other RTS

BETTER THAN



Your very own super weapon

WORSE THAN



BOTTOM LINE

The most furious, intense RTS to be released in years.

87
OUT OF 100





SUPREME COMMANDER

IF CONAN THE BARBARIAN was around today and someone asked him, "Conan, what is the best in life?" he might say something like, "To crush your enemies. See them ridiculed on the forums. Hear the lamentations of the noobs." And he might be crushing said enemies in *Supreme Commander*. At least until *Age of Conan: Hyborian Adventures* is out.

There are several different camps in the RTS genre, each with their own following and specific design - for example, *Command and Conquer's* build-then-place vs. *Warcraft/Starcraft's* build-on-the-battlefield. *Supreme Commander's* family tree starts with *Total Annihilation*, and inherits its infinite resource design and emphasis on large-scale battles. There hasn't been a new game in the TA line since *TA: Kingdoms* in 1999. However, fans of the original TA of 1997 are still playing it to this day, and many RTS fans are excited about this spiritual successor.

Supreme Commander focuses mainly on gameplay and the player's ability to keep track of and control the flow of the game. The graphics may not be the post-processed glory of *C&C 3*, but then, it's much easier to have high detail when only a few units

are visible at a time, unlike the hundreds to thousands in a large *SupCom* battle. The most significant feature here is the extreme zoom range. Unlike most RTS games, this one allows you to zoom to any range, as far out as orbit where the entire map is visible. It also lets you have two independent views if you have dual monitors. The impact of this feature may not be obvious, because using it is so natural and intuitive. Instead of scrolling by moving against the edge of the screen or trying to pinpoint a spot on the mini map, it's much easier to just use the mouse wheel to zoom out, move the pointer, and zoom back in somewhere else. After using it for a few days, going back to any other RTS's myopic zoom feels like trying to read a book through a dirty fishbowl.

In addition, the game includes well-designed waypoint and queue systems. Engineers can have long build orders queued so they don't need to be babysat, and units can be given complex routes that can be altered on the fly by dragging waypoints instead of rebuilding the path from scratch. The automatic ferrying system for air transports is also useful and makes moving large forces a snap.



Take your zoom from way out to into bases, and even closer. This is something other RTS games should look at

GPGNET MULTIPLAYER

The free online component of *Supreme Commander* uses GPGnet, which is a matchmaking system designed to help users find games to play. The client includes support for chat, automatically patches itself and the game, and maintains a ranking ladder determined by the results of ranked matches played on the service. The game itself uses a peer-to-peer networking system, so once GPGnet gets the players in touch, it gets out of the way.

While GPGnet itself usually worked quite well, we had problems more due to the users than the software. In testing, we found that *SupCom* ran fine at latencies up to 800ms, since the only component that lags is the time commands given to units take between the client and the game. However, most overseas players will kick anyone with a ping over 200ms, mistakenly believing this to be the source of slow games, which were usually underpowered CPUs. This is bad news for anyone from South Africa until a local community gets going, since international pings are rarely under 300ms.

Gas Powered Games is still improving GPGnet, and recently showed us some of what's in store. In addition to non-ranked 2 vs. 2 matches, they'll be adding a world map system to show where players are located, what map they're playing, their rank, etc. Players can then join games directly from the map. Other updates including a graphical update with DX10 support are planned.



SupCom's balance was play-tested with its large-scale multiplayer Beta, so the races are quite even and 'cheap' tactics such as rushing aren't a guaranteed success. There are many different strategies players can employ, and even super weapons, such as nuclear missiles or giant experimental units, have counters so that no one path is a guaranteed win. Since the map sizes range from 5km x 5km to 81km x 81km to scale, scouting and territory control is important, and players who attempt to 'turtle' in defensive bases are unlikely to be able to hold off assaults indefinitely.

SupCom's single-player is straightforward. Fortunately, it has been designed so that each of the three sides can be played in whatever order you choose. Since the three campaigns actually cover the same battles from three different perspectives, players who play through all the campaigns will likely recognise they're in the position the enemy was on the same map that was in the last campaign. This lets the game reuse the same maps, but rather than seem old and repetitive, it's quite fun to play the game from the other angle and see

how you do on the other side.

Each mission is preceded by a briefing cut-scene, which outlines your goals and advances the plot. One thing that does stand out is the quality of voice acting in the cut-scenes, and this is attributed to a project called "SupCom on Broadway", where volunteers acted out the scripts to check them for credibility before the professional voice actors were hired to do the final game. The problem is the in-game cut-scenes, which are triggered when you complete specific objectives. The game will seize control of the camera to go and look at the event, which can be frustrating if you were in the middle of something like an assault on your base. The 30 seconds of dead time while you're forced to watch something your wandering scouts explode can seem like an eternity.

The only real downside to this game is it's a system crusher. The high number of units and accurate physics simulation require much more CPU power than most RTS games, despite needing less GPU power. If you've been holding off on an upgrade to dual-core or 2GB of RAM, you may want to consider it about now. **NAG**

Toby Hudson



FOR FANS OF

Command & Conquer 3

ARCHIVAL OF

BOTTOM LINE
 Finally, a reason to justify that dual-core CPU you bought.

88
 OUT OF 100

EXCLUSIVE COMPETITION

COMMAND
&
CONQUER
TIBERIUM WARS

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FINAL FANTASY XII

FOR FAR TOO LONG, the *Final Fantasy* series has been overly concerned with improving its visuals. There is no doubt that *Final Fantasy* games rank as some of the most graphically impressive titles released for any platform, but eventually the lack of consideration for gameplay was going to alienate long-time fans and scare off newcomers. It feels good to be able to write that 12 is a lucky number for *Final Fantasy*, having had a rather lustreless time at the numbers eight and 10 through 11.

Final Fantasy XII is a visual feast when you get right down to it, despite the PlayStation 2 being ushered out prematurely by Sony. In between slightly average looking areas (average due to location, not any fault of the game) are stunningly grand set pieces that invite you to explore their detailed and lively locales. Just when you think you're bored with a location, it ups and changes on you, the Giza Plains being the most telling example: the slightly drab sun-swept veldt surrounding the desert-city of Rabanastre will suddenly become a rain-refreshed wonderland unexpectedly at one point, changing the landscape into something new.

You can charge around these landscapes and explore without having the experience suddenly yanked away from you by a battle

screen. This time around it all happens right there where you are, instead. Monsters are usually visible and can be avoided, but the overhauled battle-system makes these skirmishes more interesting than those before it. You can fight the normal *Final Fantasy* way by selecting commands for each character each time their Action bar fills, or you can set yourself up some Gambits to sweat the small stuff for you. Gambits let you program your party members to do certain things when the situation looks a certain way, and this leaves you free to make the more important tactical choices. Getting more Gambit slots requires traversing the rather interesting License Board where you unlock skills and summons adjacent to existing unlocked elements on a rather queer chessboard.

Beyond that, it's business as usual for *Final Fantasy XII* in the story department. It rises, falls, drags on a bit, and then suddenly explodes with comprehension and plot twists multiple times, keeping you interested despite sometimes making you want to get up and go do something more productive. Truth be told, all's good with *Final Fantasy XII* and none of the minor complaints about camera or level grinding is going to change that. You're looking at at least 50 to 100 hours of game time with *Final Fantasy XII* (which in today's age of



Final Fantasy X-2

BETTER THAN

Final Fantasy 7

AS GOOD AS

Cloud Attack E. Skill 289 1077
Tifa Summon 044 886
Red XIII Item 221 841

16+

BOTTOM LINE
A refreshing change for the series, and a little more mature in the gameplay department

91
OUT OF 100

quick fix gaming is a respectable amount) - even longer if you're the type who must solve every quest, finish every hunt and find every treasure. **NAG**

Miktar "Bangaa" Dracon

TITAN QUEST

IMMORTAL THRONE™



Titan Quest: Immortal Throne is the action-packed expansion to the 2006 RPG hit, Titan Quest. Brian Sullivan, award-winning co-creator of Age of Empires and Titan Quest, continues the epic story across the dark and more sinister Underworld of Hades.



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CRACKDOWN

WHEN DOES A CLONE stop being a clone and become something more unique in itself? The moment *Crackdown* hit the NAG office, opinions were instantly galvanised, resulting in *Crackdown* being almost haphazardly dismissed by the more veteran reviewers as a *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* clone with a much narrower action-centric focus. While the parallels between *GTA* and *Crackdown* are obvious, one has to consider that it really does only matter in the eye of the beholder. It is very easy to lump *Crackdown* with all the other *GTA*-alikes such as *Just Cause* and *Saints Row*, all for the sake of quick classification, but it isn't always best to go with the path of least resistance. In the eye of the beholder, either *Crackdown* can be a shallow *GTA* clone with an action-orientated focus, or it could be regarded as an explosive third-person shooter with a free-roaming world. Either one goes, but at the end of the day one fact remains: *Crackdown* is fun, solid and expressive despite the obvious inspirations.

The hierarchy of bosses supporting the Kingpins you need to eliminate as part of the main plot of the game creates a wonderful dynamic of personal objectives. You don't have to take out all the bosses providing the

Kingpin with support. If you want to go in guns blazing and try your luck despite the game informing you of your 10% chance of success, go right ahead. Taking out the bosses first really helps, both to weaken the Kingpin's surrounding army and to get yourself a bit more pumped with experience, levelling those skills.

These days, any game that sports cooperative earns itself respect in the eyes of the staff - anything that is fun to do alone is more fun when a friend is involved, and *Crackdown* doesn't disappoint in that area. You can invite a friend into your campaign or join them in theirs at any time via LAN or online, but you are limited to two players. Split-screen support would have been nice but is understandably absent. The music tracks that play as you drive around are a bit drab, but nothing stops you from just playing your own music through the 360. In fact, *Crackdown* is very much a game that you really should play with your own soundtrack: it makes things that much more cinematic and personal.

Don't trust the arbitrary number you find in that score box next to the review: it only wants to lie to you. **NAG**

Miktar "Sandbox" Dracon

Hulk: Ultimate Destruction

KINDALIKE



'splotions

FOR FANS OF



BOTTOM LINE

You'll always think back to the fun times you had with *Crackdown*, even though it was never your best.

83
OUT OF 100





MAGIC

The Gathering

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BRIAN LARA 2007

WITH THE CRICKET WORLD Cup dominating local TV, it was the perfect time to, yet again, hit boundaries and post scores that make the AI quiver. Unfortunately, *Brian Lara 2007* is disappointing at first glance. The graphics and sound make you think of the 2005 instalment of the title (the commentator sound packs are actually the same as the 2005 instalment). That said, the game is a whole lot of fun on the 360. The game has changed from 2005 to 2007, with some stats and options missing, but enough new features added. For example, you can choose to field at the bowler or keeper side. The game still has the same quirks as the 2005 version: if you play the World Cup or ICC Champions Trophy, then the names of the players are correct, and the models look more like the real heroes. Their alter egos in quick play do have snicker-worthy names, though, like Kulles and Pullack. Where this game does impress and make it the best cricket title yet is in its realism and gameplay. The four difficulty settings cater for those lacking basic 'finger-fu' all the way to experienced campaigners. The gameplay focuses more on timing than hitting the right button, much like *Brian Lara 2005*. Ball movement, degradation and pitch conditions are faithfully recreated, and you can toy with them yourself. As always, you can create your own custom squads, which

bring the game to life on Live. The game supports up to four players (local or on Live), which means you can play the game co-op and against your most loved or hated cricket fans. Multiplayer makes this game more fun than it legally should be. You will curse both your partner and opponent equally. To play co-op, the game splits responsibility between the two players. While the one bowls for an over, the other fields, and when batting, you each have your own character to control. The fielding has improved from the previous title, but overall, it is the same game as *Brian Lara 2005*. We wish they had done more to use the 360's power, especially on the graphics side, but it is still the only cricket game worth playing. The sound can become irritating. Whenever a batsman misses the ball, there is this horrible shriek (from the wicky maybe?), so turn down the squad sound a notch. The commentators are bothersome if you have played the previous title. As for the rest of the sound, it's no different from what you'll hear on TV. At the end of the day, don't buy this game unless you like cricket, or would like to like cricket. You will know the game of cricket well enough after playing, but it'll take some dedication. This game, although graphically outdated, is fun to play, even on your own. **NAG**

Eddie Francis



BETTER THAN

Any EA cricket game

WORSE THAN

The real thing

Bottom Line

Almost equal to the real thing, but not as pretty.

79

OUT OF 100



Game Features

- 6 playable skater characters.
- Environments include Old Downtown City Streets, Skate Arena's, Casino, and Rooftops.
- Comprehensive tutorial guides players through a variety of moves and tricks.
- Tricks include Lip Tricks, Manuals, Kicks, Grabs, Grinds and Special Tricks.
- Superb Multiplayer modes allows up to 4 players.

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ARMED ASSAULT

AFTER THE CRITICAL SUCCESS of *Operation Flashpoint*, Bohemia Interactive Studios (or BIS to its fans) was hard-pressed to produce a follow-up. Of course, being a studio of East-bloc developers, it didn't take them long to get cracking. Instead of the promised *Operation Flashpoint 2*, they released *Virtual Battlespace (VBS1)* to a somewhat more narrow market than the one *OFP* was trying to appeal to. *VBS1* not only cost a fortune, it also came with a USB dongle as a copy protection measure. Its primary success came from its use by various military units around the world, such as the Australian Defence Force and the US Marines.

With its high-end battlefield simulator shipped, BIS now had to answer to its lower end market. That is, the folks at home who want to have wars on their computers. Previously they had promised *Operation Flashpoint 2*, but the development strain of *VBS1* and an Xbox port of *OFP* meant that building a new *Flashpoint* game from the ground up became a bit of a tall order. Enter *Armed Assault*.

Armed Assault (or *ArmA* as it likes to call itself) thankfully completely avoids being the shameless cash-in the circumstances would usually produce. Although it runs on the same engine as *OFP*, the rendering API and physics system have been vastly improved. BIS has done well to reduce the 'floaty' feel of solid objects the original *OFP* suffered from, and vehicles now have a far

more weighty feel to them. Graphically, *ArmA* features all the nifty DirectX 9 effects we've been seeing in games, such as normal maps, blooms and a very elegant use of depth of field and blurs to assist the general meticulous attention to functional detail. Therefore, in addition to being quite easily (and by quite a large margin) the most exhaustively accurate modern infantry warfare simulator, *ArmA* also manages to look damn pretty.

The single-player campaign bears similarity to *OFP*'s campaign, although the narrative and storyline are clearly quite a bit stronger, with simple scripted events and squad interaction playing a somewhat stronger role. We still aren't treated to *Half-Life* style sequences or recognisable characters, but at least this time around you tend to have a much better idea of what it is that's going on and why you are where you are. The actual campaign is now structured into sorties, where you are given a few 'optional engagements' that affect your main one, such as reducing the number of enemy reinforcements or their capability. While it's not exactly sandbox, the limited degree of choice is quite a welcome addition. Of course, anyone with a quarrel about the provided missions is encouraged to use the embedded mission editor to create the game they want. As with its predecessor, *ArmA* was built very much with user-

created content in mind, and the promise of user-created content piles value onto an already very complete package. **NAG**

Travis Hogg



BETTER THAN

Operation Flashpoint

A MILES training exercise at Fort Bragg

WORSE THAN

BOTTOM LINE

ArmA should be a permanent fixture on any self-respecting military gamer's hard drive for a solid few years to come.

92

OUT OF 100



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SONY



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This is living

PLAYSTATION 3

BLADE!

Once you finish the game, it will unlock the vampire hunter Blade's model. While he can't use Ghost Rider's chains or nifty power moves, his 'Daywalker combat abilities' are pretty kick-ass and very quick, giving a different challenge if you felt Ghost Rider's flaming chains were just too effective. Give that a try for an alternate way to play the game. It makes us wonder: is a Blade game on the horizon?

GHOST RIDER

LICENSE GAMES MAKE MONEY. There's no disputing this fact. We're not even talking about the highly polished quasi-license affairs that represent *Star Wars* or anything you can brand 'spin-off'. By license you can read "made for movie fans because the studio likes cash and the movie is hot, hot, hot." It's the lowest common denominator in gaming and universally loathed by all who proclaim themselves the hardcore and elite. Catching a heavy gamer playing a license game is about as rare as a guide to nice army haircuts by Britney Spears. However, don't be surprised if the former pop princess starts a fad, because we've all played such a license game and, admit it, there were a few you really enjoyed.

That's where you can chalk up *Ghost Rider*. There are many, many things in this title that will offend the hardcore and cause many arguments between them and their cousins, who will say that the game is just plain damn awesome. The main point of contention will be that what the cousin sees as a great action title, the hardcore gamer will shoot down (with wide eyes and wider gestures) as a blatant *God of War* rip-off. Yes, just like the *Pirates of the Caribbean* game, *Ghost Rider* took comfort in copying Kratos and his über-fluid combat system. For good measure, a lot of *Devil May Cry* (arguably *GOW*'s granddaddy) also appears. Then, to

make the concoction just perfect, training wheels are added. It is very, very hard to screw up a combo in this game, especially once you unlock all of the Ghost Rider's moves. These have mostly been copied from *GOW* as well, but stop for a moment and remember what an awesome game that was. What you get here is a watered-down mutation between Kratos and Damien: any gamer who takes pride in being able to spot that builds his or her confidence on pointing out the very obvious.

Does all this make it suck? Well, *Pirates* sucked – badly – and had very little to make you want to play it. A lack of polish, cookie-cutter enemies and an overall lack of understanding what made *DMC* and *GOW* great made it an atrocious experience. *Ghost Rider*, on the other hand, seems to get what it's all about. While it's still a pure clone with little in the area of challenge, it's still fun to play. It's the perfect way to school a newbie in the ways of *GOW* and *DMC*. Yes, you will hear critics say "it's a dumb clone and how dare they, and it sucks and eeuw it's a license game," but they are morons. Providing you don't break the bank paying for it and you don't expect a masterpiece, *Ghost Rider* is a lot of fun to play. Not a classic, but not disappointing either. **NAG**

James Francis

Pirates of the Caribbean

BETTER THAN



God of War

CLONED FROM

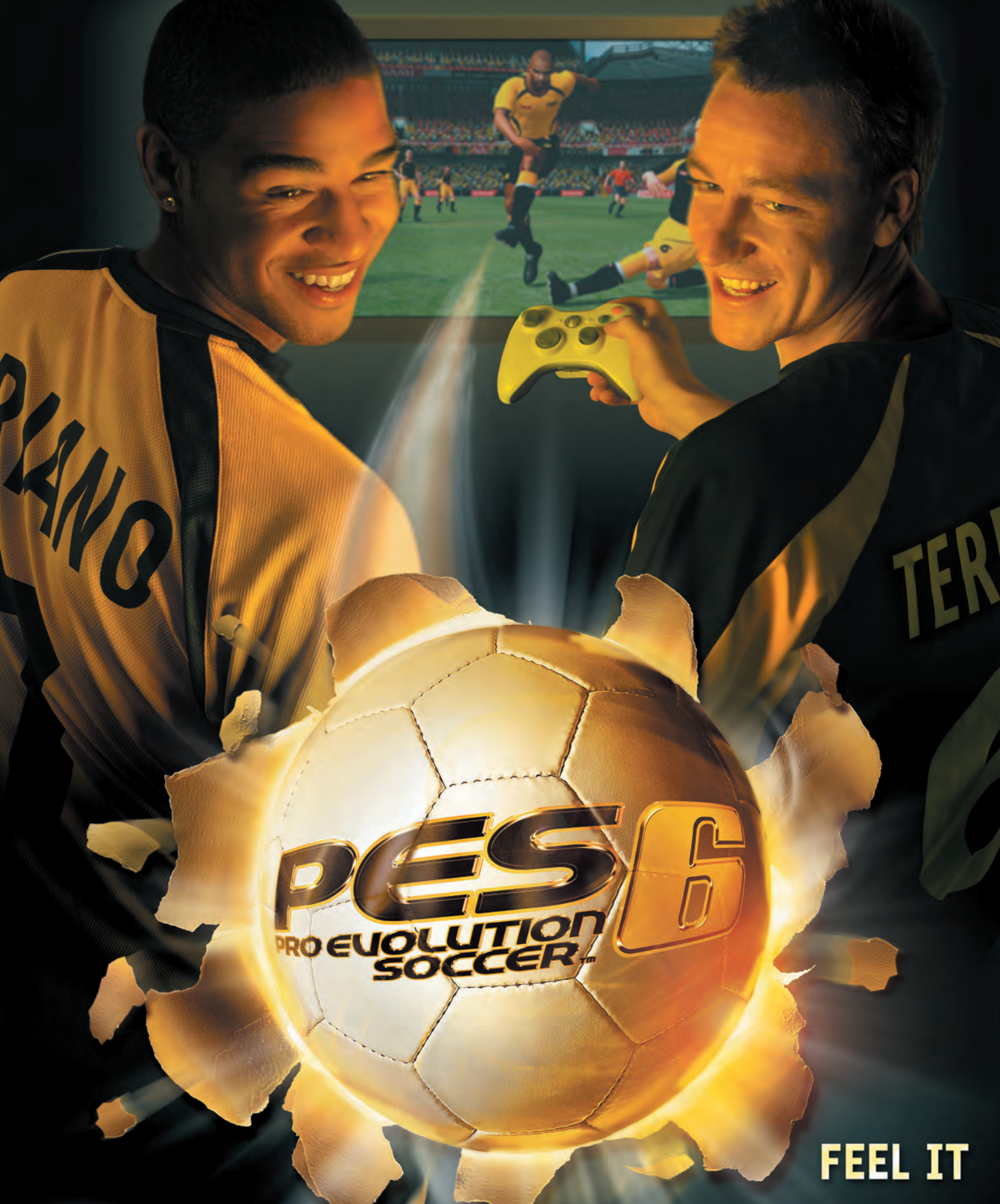


BOTTOM LINE

License + God of War + Devil May Cry + smart developer = clone you'll enjoy playing.

75
OUT OF 100



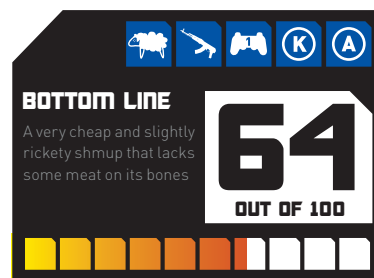


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BUBBLE BOBBLE EVOLUTION

FORGET EVERYTHING YOU THOUGHT you knew about *Bubble Bobble*. For some reason, this iteration is set in 18th century London, and instead of featuring two porky bubble-yawnin' dragons, you'll be alternating play between two kiddies dressed in dragon costumes. While taking an afternoon constitutional along the Thames River, the boys are rudely whisked away by a mysterious entity for some puzzle shenanigans in his insidiously named Towers of Entertainment. Why? Because.

While diehard fans of the series will doubtless loathe its reincarnation as a puzzler on principle, it's not actually too bad. Each level of the tower features several areas on a revolving floor, with access between them via doors or air ducts. Bub and Bob need to move all sorts of stuff between the areas to solve puzzles and open the elevators to the next floor. This might include, for example, shuffling along a lovely hot lantern encased in a bubble into another area containing an icy obstacle. And all this while trapping and popping legions of beasties out to thwart your attempts to escape.

Unfortunately, however, this game is awfully tough and unforgiving. You have very few lives, and once they're up, it's game over and you'll have to start the floor from the beginning. Moreover, with load times in excess of 45 seconds, this is more than a little annoying, especially when you're still getting to grips with the gameplay and keep flailing into those nasty purple ghost thingies. **NAG**

Tarryn van der Byl



REVIEW

Look & Listen
For the Fans

RRP → R449 | Publisher → Rising Star Games | Distributor → TBA | Genre → Puzzle/Platform

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BOTTOM LINE

This stylish "heavy metal adventure" turns it up to 11.



DEAD OR ALIVE: XTREME 2

RRP→ R499 | Publisher→ Tecmo | Distributor→ MiDigital | Genre→ Simulation

TO CALL THIS A game isn't entirely accurate. It's more of an elaborate interface for ogling girls in bikinis. For those of you who are thinking it must have some merit on some level, you are wrong. All you're going to get out of this experience is disappointment, anguish, boredom, embarrassment and that warm faced feeling that you've just been royally screwed. Let's begin and end with a typical game session. You wake up, you're on holiday and you're on an island. From here, you can visit different locations (the pool, various beaches and shops). At some of the locations, there are other girls that you can partner with or compete against. If they don't want to be your partner, it means they don't like you, which you can fix in the evenings by sending them gifts (a new bikini, suntan lotion, etc.). Eventually some of them will want to be your friend and the two of you

can spend the day together. Once you've decided on a location and activity, you can start 'playing'. Beach Volleyball, Jet Ski racing, Butt Battle and a few other inane games are on offer, each mostly involving the timed and/or sequenced pressing of buttons. At some of the locations, the only activity available is soaking up the sun, where you can also take pictures of yourself for later viewing. After about four visits to different locations, it's time for bed and you're presented with your hotel room. From here, you can view your pictures, go to bed or visit the casino. The scary part is that you can also connect to Xbox Live here and buy items available in the game with real money. So... don't waste your time or money - it's really worse than you can imagine. **NAG**

Michael James



BOTTOM LINE

It's a dark day somewhere on a beach island for the videogame industry...

27
OUT OF 100

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TrackMania United has been reviewed by **PC Zone**, which gave an excellent score of 86% and a "Recommended" award. "Fiercely addictive" and with a "Superb online community system", "TrackMania United is officially, totally great!"

Find the review in PC Zone's March issue



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LOST: THE MOBILE GAME

Publisher→ Gameloft | Supplier→ Thumbtribe | Genre→ Adventure | Download Code→ 0200300770

LOST HAS FINALLY COME to a gaming platform - the cellphone. It's a fun little game with all the suspense of its televised counterpart, as well as some good graphics and story. The game is played through the eyes of Jack and starts at the plane crash.

You will have to save others from the wreckage before going out to scout the island for food and certain medicinal plants. There are a total of 12 different levels that include various puzzles like moving boulders into rivers so that you can walk

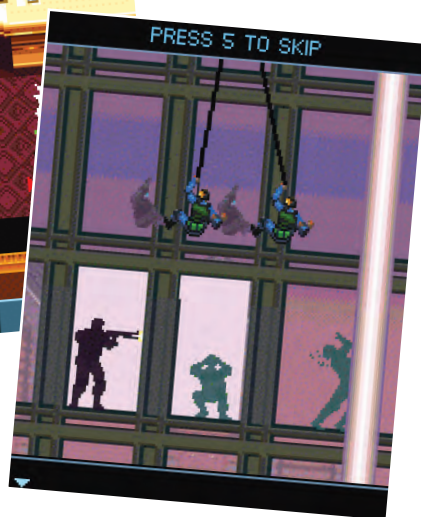
across, to cutting tall grass in order to find rare flowers. Jack will also be given different weapons from Locke like the hunting knife, which can also be used as a projectile weapon. Exploring the jungle also has its dangers like wild boars that hide in bushes and charge as you come nearer, or even the mysterious creature that has yet to be revealed on the show. You will even eventually find the famed hatch, which you will have to help Locke gather various items to open it with. Kate and Hurley will also be

seen giving you advice in the game just for that extra added *Lost* feel. **NAG**

BOTTOM LINE

Gameloft have once again delivered a top class game which encompasses all the main events of the *Lost* series

80
OUT OF 100



RAINBOW SIX: VEGAS

Publisher→ Gameloft | Supplier→ Thumbtribe | Genre→ Action | Download Code→ 02003005b0

GAMELOFT HAS ONCE AGAIN succeeded in bringing a very versatile game, with good value for the money, to the small screen. The story follows Team Rainbow as they are called in to visit the city of sin, Las Vegas, and put a stop to a terrorist attack on a hotel and casino. The gameplay offers all the usual elements of an action game with objectives such as rescuing hostages and defusing bombs, as well as an added element of arcade style sniping, which is actually a type of pin the tail on the donkey game. A player will be set up on a rooftop

with their rifle and a limited amount of time to find the enemy terrorists and shoot them. Bonus points are given depending on where you shoot them as well. The other missions that you will have to face are also quite intuitive, because you are given no control over the characters' movement but rather their crosshairs. Move the crosshairs over a bomb to defuse it and over enemies to shoot them while your team cautiously progresses through the missions. This is a fun little game, but also very short. And with its type of gameplay, it is not very replayable. **NAG**



BOTTOM LINE

Once again, Rainbow Six makes it to mobile phones everywhere but with a new gameplay style and solid levels

85
OUT OF 100





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PlayStation 2



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THIS JUST IN AT THE NAG OFFICE

**RESIDENT EVIL 4 [PC]**

Resident Evil 4 has finally made it to the PC with all the bonuses and features of the PS2 port. The game follows, once again, Leon Scott Kennedy, who is sent to Europe on a mission to save the president's daughter. In terms of gameplay, the PC version is almost identical to its PS2 counterpart, with all the weapons as well as camera angles kept intact. The graphics have been slightly improved compared to the originals, and players will see that quite a bit more detail has been put in if they can run it on the higher specs. This game is action packed from the very beginning, but doesn't feature zombies this time around. Instead, the player will be facing normal humans controlled by parasites. This is good because these enemies do seem to have better AI than their zombie counterparts. All in all, Ubisoft has created a good port for the PC with this title, and it is a good solid game in every aspect. It remains to be seen if it can keep up the pace as we progress further into the gameplay.

**TEST DRIVE UNLIMITED [PC]**

Test Drive Unlimited, the latest in a long-running series of driving-focused titles, has arrived on the PC at last after its initial debut on the Xbox 360. Was it worth the wait? Well, in answer, some might change the phrase "long-running" in the opening paragraph of this mini preview to "long in the tooth", as that is pretty much what the *Test Drive* franchise has become. Ever more uninspired, uninteresting and downright uninvolved evolutions of the original *TD* mean that even hardcore race game fans have all but given up on the series! Don't despair, however, *TDU* is literally so good on the PC that it all but rights every wrong committed until this stage. Starting with the visuals, which are truly next-gen if you have the requisite display hardware, and the latest incarnation just gets better from the ferocious, smoke-spewing, off-the-line start! The audio featured in *TDU* is so rich and so detailed that paired with the gorgeous visuals, they create true immersion in the virtual island on which your *TDU* career will take place. The driving physics, although ultimately based on the Havok physics engine and therefore not exactly tailored for a hardcore driving simulator, are good enough to make racing through these Hawaiian city streets sheer entertainment!

**WORMS HD [XBLA]**

We are worms and we have come to win the war. *Worms HD* has just been released for Xbox Live Arcade, and while it is a bit stripped-down from what we've come to expect from *World Party* and *Armageddon*, the distilled nature actually seems to be working in its favour. The weapons are straightforward and the more 'insane' weapons aren't there. This levels the playing field a bit. No team setups though, so it's a four-way every worm for himself either online or offline. So far, the experience seems to be *Worms* as expected, and they even brought back the funny awards when a round is over, such as Most Useless or Best Long Distance Shot. If we're lucky, perhaps they'll patch in some more features such as saving of replays, which would be nice. Several elements have been reworked from the classic titles, though, such as nicer backgrounds and much more accurate arcs for the homing missiles. Also, now it appears just about anyone can figure out how to swing along a cavern ceiling using the ninja rope and a timed tap on the controller. Very annoying - and we can't stop playing it.

**XPAND RALLY XTREME [PC]**

Techland released the original *Xpand Rally* some three years ago now. It included a number of very promising ideas, but it was an utter flop. Eventually, it became one of those free games that come with every graphics card you buy... With *Xpand Rally Xtreme*, however, this small Eastern-bloc developer might have really cracked it. The rally-racing genre isn't exactly hotly contested, with just two titles vying for dominance depending on whether you prefer an arcade or simulator experience. *XRX* is actually an excellent effort at taking both of these on at once! What's more, the scenery is positively breathtaking and succeeds in completely immersing the player in the track being driven at the time. Each course includes hundreds of small details as well as grand scenery, with small road imperfections affecting the attitude of the car each step of the way, keeping the virtual rally driver busy with his choice of controller. It's dubbed a 'Next-Gen Driving Experience' on the box. At first we thought this was just buzz-word dropping and no more, but after just a few hours behind the wheel, we know better.

**BULLET WITCH [360]**

She carries a big morphing gun and can summon a tornado into the middle of a gunfight. Initially we were sceptical about the game, but when we suddenly had to fight a giant inside-out skeletal fish while running atop a 747 in the air, we knew we were sold on it. Yeah, the game doesn't look as great as it should and there is no lock-on, which makes things stupid-tough. But there is a certain charm to *Bullet Witch* we can't put our finger on. We hope it keeps up the pace, but truthfully, we're not that far in (like, fourth level at most). The spells are very hands-on, though, which lends a lot to the game, and the animations are pretty impressive, especially when you consider the more budget look of the game overall. Some of us are playing it on easy; others are playing it on normal. Those who are playing on easy keep trying to give advice to those playing on normal, which of course isn't that useful since the game is drastically different in difficulty between easy, and normal. There, I said it. *[Of course, said person on medium difficulty kept getting his ass kicked by the big fish until said person on easy suggested he try standing on the 747's wings - Ed.]*

**RESISTANCE: FALL OF MAN [PS3]**

Boom! Aliens have landed and spread all over Eurasia. Now, soldiers in Britain take a last stand against this seemingly unstoppable force of bugs with guns and other surprises in what is largely considered the best PS3 launch title. If anything, *Resistance: Fall of Man* demonstrates how big and important the FPS genre has become on consoles, and while fans await the supposed *Halo* killer, *Killzone 2*, this is their first point of entry to a world of first-person action on the PS3. It looks impressive and plays well, though after too many games featuring recharging health bars, you tend to die quickly and early. But liberal save points appear to be the order of the day, and the title seems to promise a lot of interesting weapons that you can pick up, especially from the aliens. Graphically it sits somewhere between 'okay' and 'awesome', depending on what you look at. It doesn't beat any of the second-generation games on the 360, but it is a launch title and you can't help but notice that the PS3 never frame-drops despite the game's high-poly graphics.

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For the Fans

PAINKILLER: BLACK EDITION

IN THE APRIL 2005 issue of NAG, we reviewed *Painkiller: Black Edition* (page 74) and ended up giving it a score of 76. "If you're looking for old-school FPS action, *Painkiller* is definitely worth a look" said the reviewer. The tone of his (or her) review was generally upbeat due to *Painkiller* letting him (or her) relive the *Quake* and *Doom* glory days. *Black Edition* is basically *Painkiller* plus the Battle out of Hell expansion, along with a 'making of' feature, a preview of the Xbox version *Painkiller: Hellwars* and a crappy music video.

It is now two years later exactly and for this month's Looking Back we're going to take a look where *Painkiller* has been since we last reviewed it, and where it might be going.

Unsurprisingly, *Painkiller* has managed to find its way onto Valve's digital distribution service, Steam, as *Painkiller: Gold Edition*, which is really just *Black Edition* at the rather affordable price tag of \$19.95 (R140). Being distributed on Steam has no doubt injected some much-needed cash into the pockets

of developer People Can Fly, although it remains to be seen if we can expect a *Painkiller* sequel.

Near the end of 2004, the Cyberathlete Professional League (CPL) chose *Painkiller* to be their official 2005 World Tour game. *Painkiller* beat *Unreal Tournament 2004* (Epic couldn't guarantee their full support for the year-long tour) as well as *Doom 3* (which wasn't designed for pro-level play). And so, *Painkiller* had a brief stint as being the 1 vs. 1 competition game of choice for a while, but was quickly replaced by *Quake 4* once it was announced as the CPL 2006 deathmatch game for 1 vs. 1. When Fatal1ty came to rAge in 2005, local gamers had the chance to try and beat the master at *Painkiller* for a delicious cash prize (but nobody managed it).

Painkiller's competitive play was almost solely due to it being the 2005 CPL deathmatch title, and once it lost that spot, the multiplayer community around it quickly faded. Even its official Website

(www.painkillergame.com) hasn't had a news update since July 2006, and the Clan Talk part of the official *Painkiller* forums hasn't seen a new post in months, possibly a year (it only throws up a message saying "No new posts in the last 30 days").

Despite the modding tools and level editor available for *Painkiller*, the only mod that was ever released was the PK++ mod for competitive play. Moddb.com lists no other mods for *Painkiller*, so you could consider that part of the game effectively dead. In terms of maps released by the community, there really isn't anything special out there.

Internationally, *Painkiller* is all but forgotten now that the CPL has had its way with it, but locally there still seems to be a dedicated following that occasionally fires up *Painkiller* at LANs for a quick deathmatch.

The last patch for *Painkiller* was v1.62, and SAIX no longer hosts any online servers for it. Let's all take a moment to mourn the passing of an average, but fun action shooter. **NAG**



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BLU-RAY PIPS HD DVD IN FIRST QUARTER



THE HIGH-DEFINITION FORMAT WAR is over, says Sony. Citing statistics released by consumer researchers Nielsen VideoScan, Sony's Blu-ray Discs are apparently outselling Microsoft and Toshiba's HD DVDs by a ratio of more than 2:1, with reported January sales figures showing only 38.36 HD DVD titles sold for every 100 Blu-ray titles. And this despite Microsoft's recent adoption of the HD DVD format with its add-on drive for the Xbox 360, as well as an initial lead over Sony with a head start on its format launch and a considerably more attractive price point.

Of course, reasonable scepticism suggests that this may simply be a reflection of a greater number of Blu-ray releases for the period, as 25 titles hit the markets compared to just 11 on HD DVD. Nonetheless, this is some good news for Sony, who has been beset by prophecies of certain doom by industry analysts since the somewhat underwhelming arrival of the PlayStation 3.

A recent online survey, completed by 100,000 PS3 owners, revealed that 90% of them had watched

a Blu-ray film on their consoles, with 80% saying that they intended to buy titles in the future. Hoping no doubt to further this trend, the company has announced a promotion for European consumers, offering a free copy of *Casino Royale* when the console is launched on 23 March.

Behind the scenes, however, the scramble for format dominance is further complicated as Hollywood studios and electronics manufacturers take sides. While Warner, Paramount Pictures, New Line Cinema, HBO and a number of other prominent studios are releasing titles on both formats, Goldwyn-Mayer, 20th Century Fox, Walt Disney Pictures, and Sony are sticking with Blu-ray, with Universal being the sole purveyor of HD DVD-exclusive titles. This would seem to offer a potential market advantage to Sony, as David Bishop, president of Sony Pictures Home Entertainment, cheekily remarked, "Seeing HD DVD in our rear-view mirror is no surprise to us." Among manufacturers, Sony, Hitachi and Philips have

opted for Blu-ray, while Toshiba, Sanyo, and NEC favour HD DVD. LG is the only manufacturer to have released a combo player, the BH100.

Meanwhile, Sony is also set to release a successor to its flagship standalone player, the extravagantly expensive \$999 BDP-S1. The BDP-S300, due for a summer release, will arrive in a smaller form factor, and will also be able to play CDs. And its big selling point? A price tag of just \$599. Whether selling a glorified DVD player for the same price as the Blu-ray-enabled PS3 console proves a wise marketable strategy remains to be seen.

In an interesting turn of events, however, Toshiba has just announced the successful creation of a triple-layer HD DVD that will hold up to 51GB of total data – a 1GB increase over Sony's format. This comes hot on the heels of Warner's announcement of a hybrid format, the dual-sided TotalHD Disc, which will accommodate both HD DVD and Blu-ray on a single disc. Both new formats are slated for release in the second half of this year.

64 DVDS ON A HOLOGRAPHIC DISC

FOR A COUPLE OF decades now, we've been hearing about how holographic storage is "just around the corner". Every few years a company shows a design or a proof-of-concept but not really practical device that will "revolutionise storage" with some ludicrous capacity claims. Well it may finally be time one of these pie in the sky projects ships.

InPhase Technologies has announced it will begin shipping a holographic storage system priced at \$18,000 per drive, with \$180 discs that store 300GB of data. The discs have a transfer rate of 20MB/sec, a mean time between failure rating of 100,000 hours, and an expected shelf life of 50 years, putting them roughly on par with DVD performance. They plan to expand to an 800GB and 80MB/sec disc by the end of next year, and 1.6TB by 2010, both of which should be backwards compatible. One of the advantages of holographic storage is the data is below the surface of the medium, so scratches have little effect on the data.



SOLID STATE HARD DRIVES READY TO GO

WHEN IT RAINS, IT pours, and apparently it's suddenly raining solid-state hard drives. While solid-state drives have been around for ages, they've typically been in the price range that only military projects could afford. Well, now multiple companies have announced almost reasonably priced solid-state drives, which could potentially be a contender against magnetic hard drives in the PC market.

First off is Intel, who has announced its Z-U130-series based on NAND flash. Intel says the 1GB and 2GB versions have already shipped, with 4GB to be available shortly and 8GB by the end of the year. The drives read at 28MB/sec and write at 20MB/sec, and Intel claims that the drives are priced comparable with 1.8-inch hard drives used in portable music players, and should compete with

2.5-inch laptop drives by 2008. Unfortunately, they haven't announced a capacity above 8GB yet.

Next up is SanDisk, who has been making a lot of noise about solid-state drives. They had initially planned a 32GB 2.5-inch drive at \$500, but have instead launched it at \$350. The drive can sustain 67MB/sec reads, is more reliable, and draws less power than existing laptop hard drives. SanDisk plans to aggressively push the drive in the laptop market.

Finally, we have Super Talent, who has a whole range of solid-state disks. They recently announced a range of SATA drives, with 1.8-inch models from 4-32GB, 2.5-inch versions from 8-64GB, and 3.5-inch drives in 64GB and 128GB. So far, no pricing info has been released.



WORLD'S THINNEST CRT AND LCD

SAMSUNG SDI HAS OUTDONE its parent company, Samsung Electronics, with its 0.74mm thick LCD - a whole 0.08mm thinner than their current record. It will, however, be a while before we get to see these LCDs, but they are expected to be released on their "next-generation" phones. Currently we can expect to see their 1.9mm LCD on the new Ultra Edition II handsets.

CRT TVs still make up just under 50% of the market, mostly because of the large price differences between CRT and LCD displays. Samsung, the world's largest producer of LCD displays, has not given up on the CRT market yet and recently rolled out five new CRT models that appear to be flat panel displays at first glance. It is, however, expected that by the year 2009 CRTs will no longer be sold in the US.



While Samsung may be topping the charts with the smallest phone LCD, LG claims to have the thinnest CRT currently available. Unfortunately, it is only available as a 21-inch model at this stage, which still lacks appeal even with the cheaper price tag.

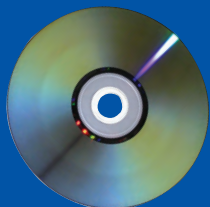
HARDWARE SCORING SYSTEM

OUR HARDWARE SCORING SYSTEM is based on the reviewer's expert opinion. The scale is from 1 to 5. Each number has a specific meaning, described below. Most products will score 3 or 4, with the occasional 5 or 2, and almost never 1. Note that a high price alone can never lower a score below 3.

- 5** The stuff of Legends. Buy it while you can, I probably already have.
- 4** A good deal; worth it if you're shopping for one.
- 3** About what you'd expect, no problems. You might want to wait for it to go on sale.
- 2** This has some issues. You should probably shop around for something else if possible.
- 1** The stuff of Nightmares. You'll probably be sorry you got one, even if it was free.

SNIPPETS

YOUR ESSENTIAL INFO, NOW
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An alternative has risen in the **Blue-ray/HD DVD war**. 3x DVD spins, as you might guess, three times as fast as a regular DVD, which means the usual red laser found on DVD drives can read data faster. In other words more data, which means higher resolutions and so on. The upside is that the expensive blue laser isn't needed, plus plants that have DVD equipment don't need to do costly upgrades needed for the other two formats.



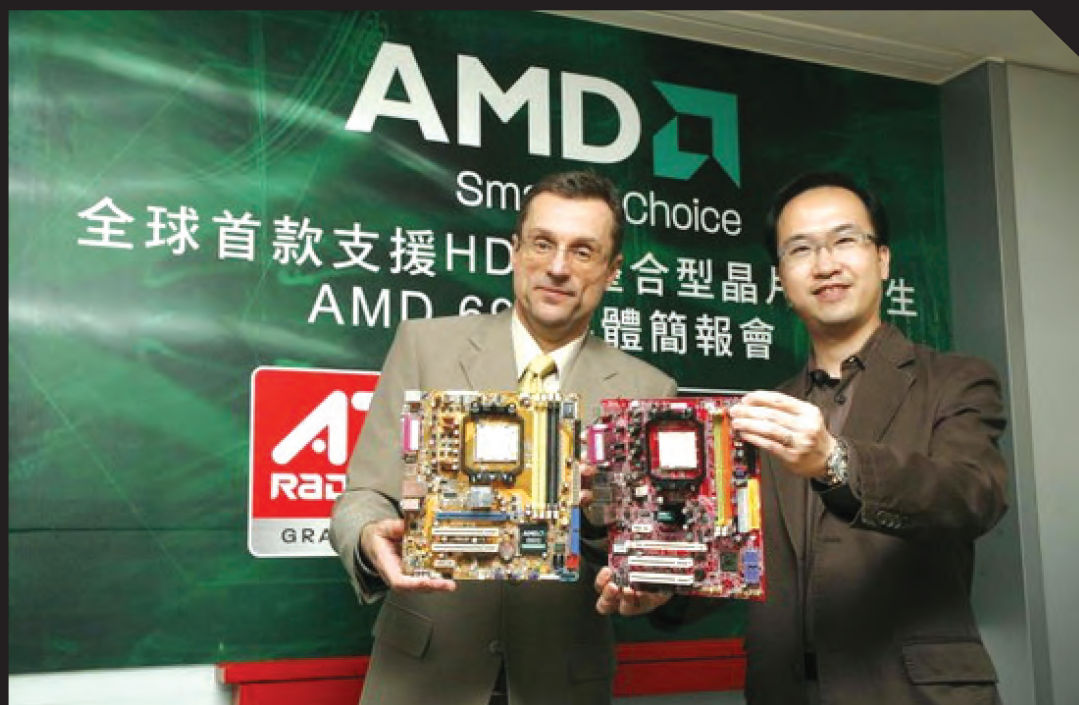
NASA has confirmed that it developed a **quantum computer chip** for upstart D-Wave. The computer was supposed to have been demonstrated to press and academics in February, but someone forgot the chip at the office and the demonstration was done over the Web. That created a lot of scepticism over whether the chip actually existed and worked. But NASA confirmed that it had made the chip – maybe D-Wave should just do a better job with its announcements and demonstrations.

Chinese researchers at Shanghai Jiao Tong University have announced a new method to **recycle printed circuit boards** – the fiberglass and resin boards that form the base of electronic equipment everywhere. Traditionally the boards are thrown away, which means the heavy metals they contain can go into the ground (or air if burned) and current recycling methods to get to the copper and such can cause highly-dangerous fumes. This new method crushes the boards and then uses a high-voltage electric field to separate the metals and non-metals.



Samsung announced that it has created **GDDR4 memory that runs at speeds of 4Gbps**. That's two-thirds faster than the usual GDDR4 speed of 2.4Gbps and was achieved using 80 nanometer production technology. The first memory to use this will be a 512MB chip and mass production is expected to start later this year.

AMD INTRODUCES 690G CHIPSET



ADVANCED MICRO DEVICES HAS released its latest chipset designed to meet the needs of a Vista Premium PC. This chipset features graphics capabilities based on the Radeon X1250.

The new chipset is said to be a step toward AMD's Fusion processors, which are expected to merge x86 and ATI graphics cores onto one chip. The processors are scheduled to ship in 2009 and will initially be available for notebooks. AMD plans to offer them for desktops later. AMD's 690 series is optimised for running the enhanced graphics found in Vista, the latest version of Microsoft Windows.

AMD 690 Series chipsets are designed to deliver a Windows Vista Premium experience, handling the Aero user interface and demanding workloads with ease. For the first time ever on an AMD chipset, the AMD 690 Series features ATI AVIVO technology for the most vibrant images and smoothest video playback for multimedia applications for the office. This new chipsets series will bring new functionality and performance to the integrated graphics market. Six manufacturers have already signed up for the chipset, including Gigabyte and MSI.

BRINGING THE 360 TO THE PC

THERE ARE QUITE A few ways to connect your PC and 360, but the real bonus a PC gamer gets out of owning a 360 is to use the controllers on his or her PC. Alas, up to now that has only been possible if you used a wired USB cable. But Wireless is the future (for as long as the batteries allow, of course) and Microsoft has released an adapter that will let you connect the 360's wireless controllers to your PC - this apparently means any of the 360's wireless controllers, including the Logitech Racing Wheel and possibly even the Guitar Hero controller. Called the Official Xbox 360 Wireless Gaming Receiver for Windows, you can pick it up locally for around R250.



NVIDIA GEFORCE 8600-SERIES READY TO LAUNCH IN APRIL

AT CEBIT IN GERMANY, IHVs have been showing of what they term "a DX10 midrange NVIDIA graphics card" - obviously the 8600-series graphics cards. Differing from the previous generation, the top graphics card in the series is the GTS, followed by the GT. This time, NVIDIA has omitted the GS from the line-up, which should be good news for the end-user. The 8600GTS and the 8600GT are based on the NVIDIA G84 core, which houses 300 million gates on an 80nm GT process. Both cards are based on the outgoing 7600GT PCB, which is actually based on the 6600 PCB. The 8600GTS features 64 stream processors and a core clocked at 675MHz. With that is the option of either 256MB or 512MB of GDDR3 operating at 1GHz for an impressive 32GB/sec memory bandwidth. The 8600GT, however, doesn't receive the same treatment, as it only features 48 processors and a core clock of 540MHz. Memory speeds are undisclosed so far, but initially only 128MB versions of the graphics card will be shipping with the option of 256MB. Pricing has not been finalised yet, but both parts should occupy the same price points previously reserved for the 7600GT and 7600GS.

The 8600GTS is said to support HDCP keys natively in the core, while the 8600GS will require add-on chips to support the content protection scheme. Both, however, will feature dual-link DVI and/or a DVI/HDMI combo depending on the IHV. These GPUs mark the first sub \$199 parts that are DX10 capable and the biggest core ever for sub \$199 parts, dwarfing that of the previous generation high-end 7900GT and 7900GTX. NVIDIA is said to also be preparing the 8500 series graphics cards, which should replace the 7300GT at the low end. Specifications for the 8500 have yet to be disclosed, but insiders have suggested 32 stream processors for the low-end part.



GUITAR HERO II WIRELESS CONTROLLERS SOON

HAVE YOU PLAYED *GUITAR Hero* yet? Why not? How many times do we have to plug the game to convince you it's WELL WORTH YOUR CASH? But never mind that; soon plenty of local 360 owners will have the chance to play this classic game, albeit with a wired controller. Yes, in all its glory the 360 doesn't have an official wireless guitar for the game. There are some third-party offerings in the US, but that's far away and usually the genuine article lasts a lot longer. Fortunately, a wireless version is apparently on the way. That's according to *Guitar Hero II*'s associate producer, Ted Lange, who told game site IGN that a wireless model is on its way "rather shortly." He also assured everyone that the game will feature a lot more download content than any other 360 game had so far, though don't expect much (if any) of it to be free. No word on local availability yet.



AMD has announced that it will make its **mobile graphics technology available for licensing**. Citing AMD's experience in developing for the field, Paul Dal Santo, VP and general manager of AMD's Handheld Division, said: "This uniquely qualifies AMD to work with OEMs and other semiconductor suppliers to bring to market handheld devices capable of delivering The Ultimate Visual Experience." AMD also unveiled three new mobile media processors.



Sony revealed that it will take Cell production to **45-nanometer, down from the current 90-nanometer** standard, by late 2008 or early 2009. But the company is still deciding whether it should do this in-house or if outsourcing the production would be better.



NVIDIA has released an interactive version of its DirectX 10 tech demo called **Cascades**. You'll need top of the line hardware to run it (obviously with a DX10 compatible card) and grab the demo from http://www.nzone.com/object/nzone_cascades_home.html

The Chinese government has given **Intel permission to open a new \$2.5 billion plant in Dalian**, according to a press release from National Development and Reform Commission. The plant will manufacture microprocessors using a 90-nanometer manufacturing process and aims to have a production capacity of 52,000 chips a month. No news on when the plant's own construction will start, though.



Phil Harrison from Sony has revealed that the PS3 will soon support upscaling for regular DVDs. But he didn't know when it will happen. The announcement is rather timely considering Microsoft's own plans to introduce a much-improved scaler chip on the 360.



GROUND ZERO

by Toby Hudson

INTRODUCTIONS

WELCOME TO THE NEW and improved hardware section of *NAG*. If you're an avid reader of PC enthusiast magazines, you may have noticed the disappearance of a particular local magazine a few months back. You may think that the fact that *NAG* has suddenly bulked up is an interesting coincidence, but those who keep track of things like writers' names will likely figure things out pretty quick.

It was an interesting surprise when we found our readers to be much more PC-centric than we first believed, according to survey results we got back. So we'll be making our hardware coverage bigger, better, more detailed, and more interesting. If you enjoyed the articles on dry ice overclocking and CPU sanding in the last few months, there'll be more of that to come once we come up with more ideas.

Another change is our new scoring system. Previously, hardware didn't get scores like games, despite the fact that other magazines are sometimes very score-orientated. The problem is that scores tend to be arbitrary. It's difficult to decide if a product is an 89 or a 90, and why. It's not really consistent or fair. Breaking it down into categories like speed, features, value, etc. is just an abstraction. All you've done in that case is generating more arbitrary numbers that went through a formula and resulted in a number no more realistic than the original method.

So, I pondered how to come up with a scoring system that actually meant something. Eventually I realised that when people ask me about buying hardware, I usually have a fairly standard set of responses. Therefore, I pitched the idea of a *subjective* scoring system, since a truly objective system is rather pointless. We already have that, they're called benchmarks. The new system works on a 1-5 scale, with no fractional values. Each number has a specific literal interpretation. It goes something like this:

- 5 You should buy this. Right now. If I could afford it, I'd probably already have bought one. If you pass it up for something else, you risk the possibility of ridicule by your savvier peers. [Always a danger in the PC hardware community.]
- 4 This is a good deal, no problems. If you're looking for a piece of hardware in whatever category this product is, you can't really go wrong with this one.
- 3 Eh, it's okay. I might buy it on sale or when it drops in price. I'd probably go shopping around for something else before I settle for it, but I wouldn't rule it out.
- 2 I won't kick it to the curb, but I wouldn't exactly pay money for it either. If it is dumped on me for free I'd probably use it, but I wouldn't even bother looking for one.
- 1 Get rid of it. Anything this bad is more trouble than it's worth. You'd have to pay me to take it, probably enough so that I could afford something else that doesn't suck, and then I would burn this.

Needless to say, the distribution of these scores won't be equal. Just as you rarely see game scores over 90 or under 60, I anticipate most things to score fours or threes. Fives and twos will be rare. I'll be surprised if we see ones more than once or twice a year, if that. Nevertheless, they're there for that occasional product that just loves to move in and terrorise the rest of your system with bugs and problems, which happens once in a while. Note that being overpriced can't drop a product below a three, no matter how expensive. There have to be actual problems for it to be awarded a two.

Oh, we'll also be borrowing the better than/worse than concept from the game reviews as well. This is to help answer the never-ending questions of "Is part X better than part Y?", where X and Y usually have some obscure difference like a different letter on the end or a number about 50 lower or higher. **NAG**





HARDWIRED

by Neo Sibeko

MOVE TO VISTA: JUST DO IT

JUST WHAT DO WINDOWS Vista and DirectX 10 bring to us, other than yet more promises of better visuals that have plagued every DirectX update?

Sure, we have seen the *Flight Simulator*, *Alan Wake* and *Crysis* screenshots. However, how is this different from before under Windows XP? Well, the answer is rather simple: for the first time all these features are manifesting themselves in actual game visuals and not just endless technical demos. Despite the feelings of some prominent game developers, Vista and DirectX 10 change how game engines are created, and as a result change the games themselves.

To derive any useful benefit from any DirectX 10 graphics card, it means that one is forced to upgrade to Windows Vista. While this may be an unpleasant thought to some, it is necessary, as the true benefit of the new unified architecture is negligible under the old DX9 environment. The gravity of the shift to the new operating system and API seems lost to many, but trust us, it is much bigger than any in-game screenshot or synthetic benchmark can show.

Are there previous generation cards that are faster than current generation graphics accelerators? Sure, these graphics cards were the last of a generation and the Radeon X2900 and GeForce 8800/8900 are the beginning of a new era. Our game and synthetic benchmarks are largely meaningless because we are testing a completely new architecture with old tools that are tied to the old API and as a result the old hardware.

During the course of this year and the next, it will become very apparent why any DirectX 10 graphics card is a better buy "for the same class" than any DirectX 9 graphics card.

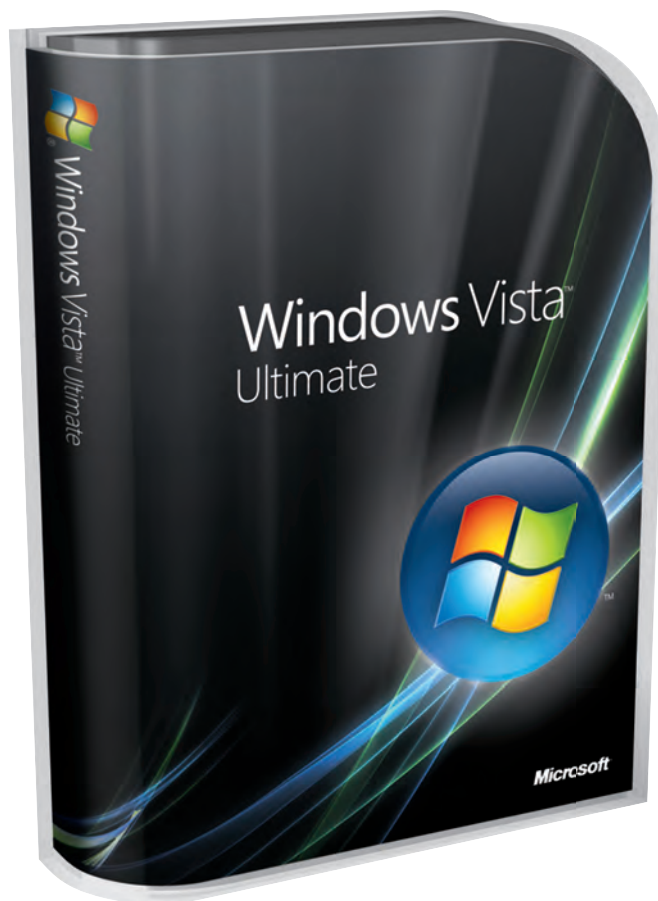
One of the most significant things that Microsoft has done (which is rarely ever spoken about) is the standardisation of qualitative features across all products bearing the DirectX 10 compliancy sticker. That translates into us, the end-users, not having to worry about AMD supporting some proprietary form of displacement mapping while NVIDIA supports a different but also proprietary form. This by default makes purchasing decisions much easier for us all. All that should concern you from now on is performance and not image quality or other qualitative acronyms that were previously used to sway us one way or the other. This conformity extends to image quality as well, which has been a much-debated issue since the advent of programmable graphics cards.

No longer will we be subjected to dull lights due to low precision shaders, shimmering textures and angle-dependent filtering modes. All of these issues have now been relegated to the past where they should stay.

Even further than the actual graphics cards, there is likely going to be resurgence in the discreet graphics cards market. This is simply because the playing fields have been levelled and all IHVs only really compete in speed and pricing. Once the initial DX10 investment in silicon has been made, the production costs diminish with each generation of the graphics cards. For manufacturers that don't have the kind of R&D budgets that AMD and NVIDIA command, they could spread that R&D over a number of years while continuing to sell their products.

This is beneficial to everybody, including all the IHVs, because with more competition comes better products at lower prices. If OEM machines that ship with the usually sub-par onboard accelerators start shipping with DirectX 10 capable parts, it automatically means the content in PC games is much better and cheaper to produce. This creates a win-win situation for us all. No other time has this been since the advent of 3D accelerators. As such, it is a true cause for celebration.

Yes, we have to pay for new graphics cards and a new operating system, but had we to carry on in the same path that we had been on since the late nineties, that would eventually have led to the demise of the GPU market and with that the disappearance of our beloved PC as the leading platform in visuals. **NAG**



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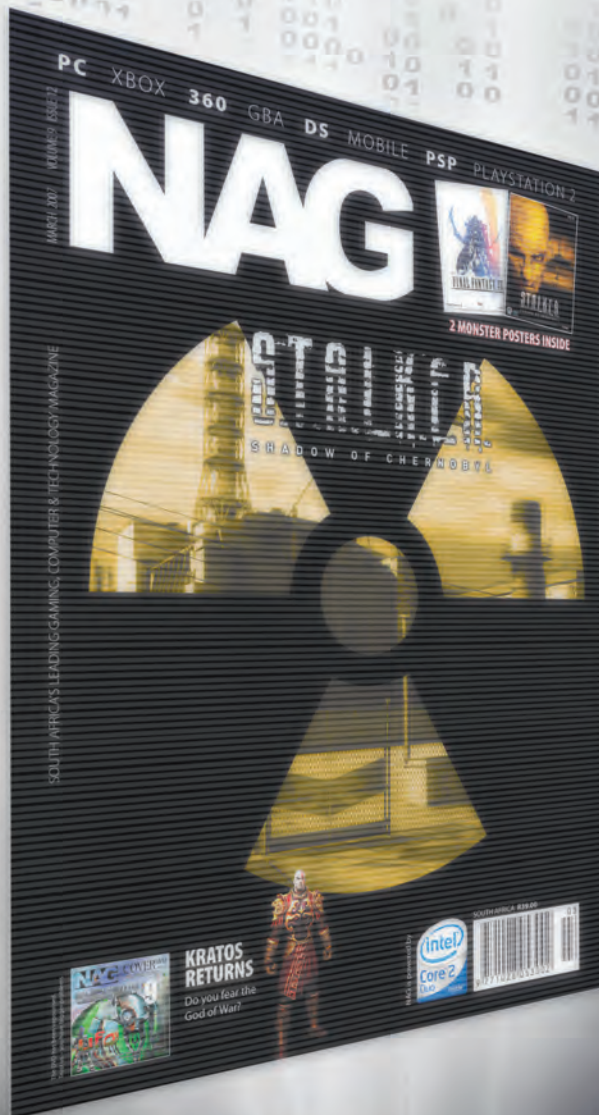
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NOKIA



CHAINTECH GEFORCE 8800GTS 320MB

LAST YEAR, WHEN THE GeForce 8800 made its debut, nobody were prepared for what NVIDIA announced, as we had all expected the discreet vertex and pixel shader part that Dr David Kirk had alluded to in many interviews. However, upon release it was very clear that he had (intentionally or otherwise) led us, the end-users, widely off on what their next-generation part would be. Featuring an unheard of 128 and 96 math unit (ALU) for the respective parts, it was a true revolution like no other before it in the market. Suffice to say, it caught everybody off guard. Never before had there ever been such a CPU bound graphics cards. It was clear that the regular

1,280 x 1,024 to 1,920 x 1,200 resolutions that we had previously employed to test graphics cards would no longer be enough. The 8800s simply ploughed through the tests, delivering framerates that multi-graphics card solutions couldn't just a few months before.

The hype was great. One could almost taste the excitement on the day of release. NVIDIA had stunned the computing world, not only in performance, but also in the quality of the rendered image. With NVIDIA having become synonymous with inferior image quality compared to its biggest competitor at the time, ATI, it was a pleasant surprise to see NVIDIA produce a graphics card that had

SPECS

GPU:	NVIDIA G80
CORE CLOCK:	500MHz
SHADER VERSION:	4.0
PIPELINES:	96
VIDEO MEMORY:	320MB
MEMORY CLOCK:	800MHz (1,600MHz DDR)
MEMORY BUS:	320-bit

SCORE



BETTER THAN:
Any DX9 Graphics Card

WORSE THAN:
Any other 8800



the best image quality since the advent of 3D acceleration all those years back.

Obviously, with any new advancement and revolution there is some collateral damage, and the GeForce 8800 is no exception to this. The sheer size of the GPU and the process it employs meant that we were for the first time dealing with a graphics card that could easily idle at 75°C and load at 85°C, if not more.

With all the good that came with the 8800 GPU also came the shocking prices that the cards were retailing at. Besides the usually exorbitant local prices, the MSRP of \$599 for the GTX and \$499 for the GTS shocked many people who had expected the GTX to be selling for the GTS price. This pricing obviously left a void in the high-end to mid-range market and forced end-users to purchase the ultra expensive parts. There may be many technical reasons why there weren't any mid-range parts, but one reason is that the two high-end parts would generate maximum revenue for NVIDIA. This strategy worked, and NVIDIA posted record fourth-quarter earnings of \$878.9 million for 2007, a 39% increase over the same period in 2006.

So with that NVIDIA has introduced the 320MB 8800GTS. Identical in every way to the 640MB 8800GTS, this new addition to the 8800 family brings the same great performance and image quality, but for much less than the other two cards. This in itself is very significant because there has never been a graphics card of this performance at this price point ever before. Surely, by now all regular NAG readers are familiar with the awesome performance that one can expect from any graphics card based on the 8800 GPU. Where this card is different from the other two is in how it handles high-resolution graphics, and more specifically, how it doesn't quite handle them like the other two in the family.

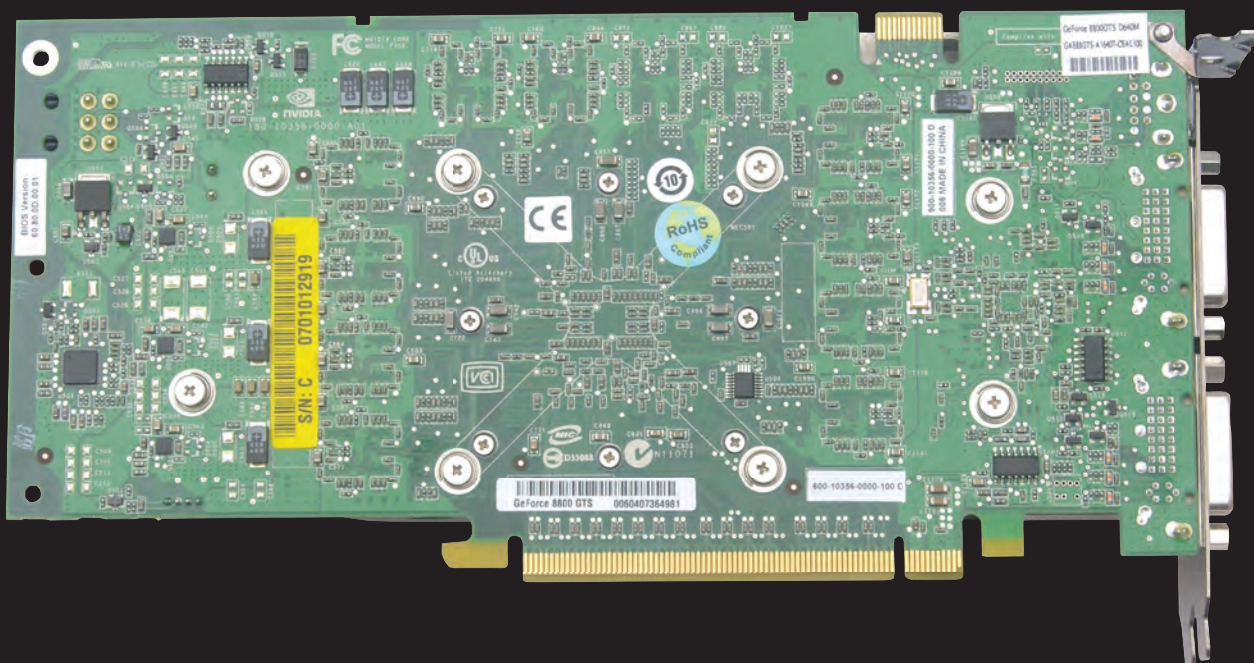
For instance, gameplay at 1,920 x 1,200

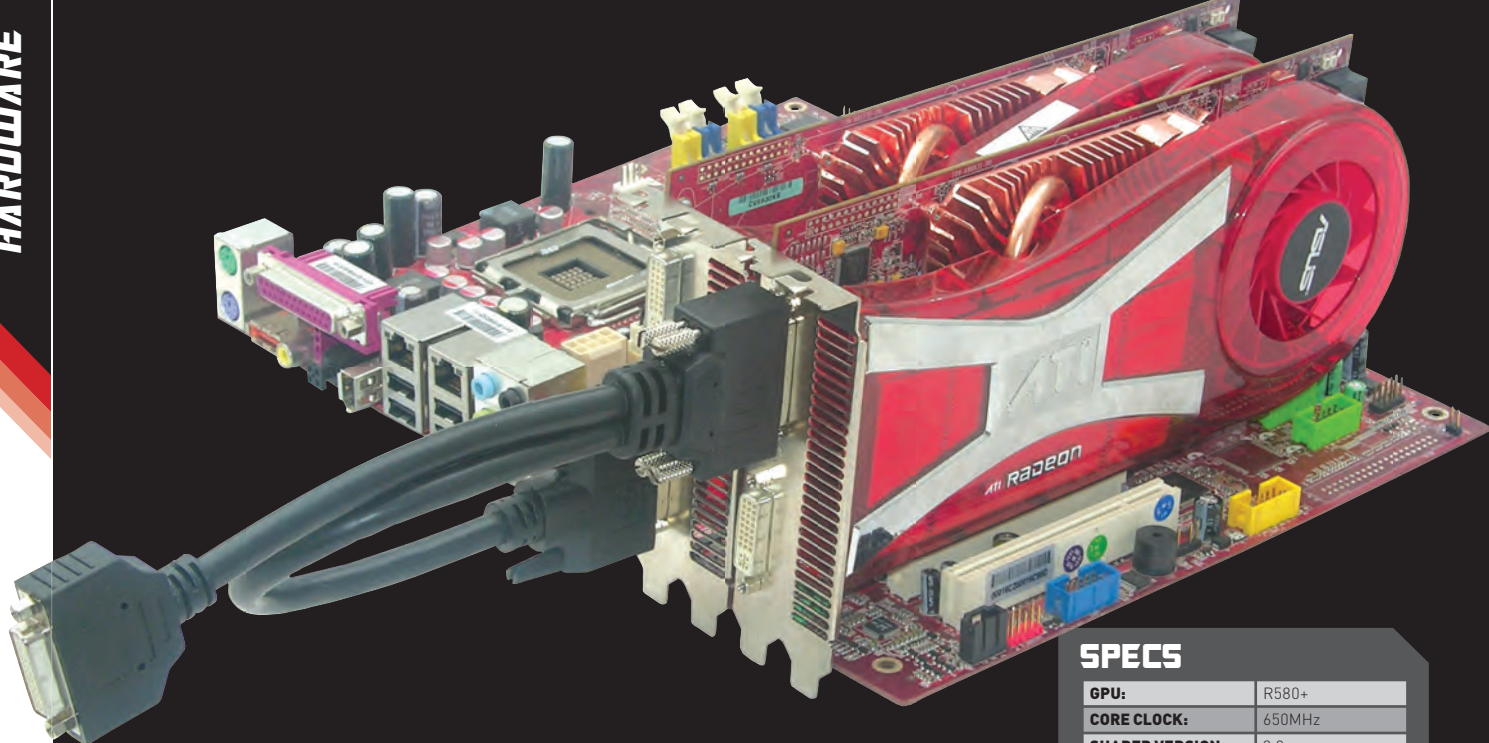
with 4x AA is out of the question in all but the oldest games, as there just isn't enough memory to hold more than a given number of frames. This, however, is only really relevant with current OpenGL and DirectX 9 games that are texture heavy, as they make use of multiple texture passes to achieve rich scene detail and the like. This has a negative effect on performance when antialiasing is used with high resolutions where the use of texture memory grows exponentially. That means that while the current numbers don't look too impressive when used with these post-processing effects, they will look much better with future games that aren't relying on arcane ways of implementing antialiasing or multiple maps to simulate relief mapping.

In one particular game, *Splinter Cell: Chaos Theory*, the Chaintech 8800GTS 320MB performed very well even at 2,048 x 1,536. This game makes use of great normal and displacement maps that really shine when combined with HDR. As all of this is calculation heavy, the Chaintech card does very well. If anything, one should expect more performance like this from future titles such as *Alan Wake*, *Unreal Tournament 3* and others. Right now, however, considering that those who own displays capable of 1,920 x 1,200 are a small minority, the 320MB 8800 is the best graphics card for less than R4,000. There isn't much to fault with this card. Yes, there are no bundled games, but it's unlikely that you are going to get *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.* or *Supreme Commander*, so the absence of a bundled title is a moot point really.

The image quality and performance offered by the Chaintech card is nothing short of amazing and it's a great replacement for 7900GT class graphics cards. This card would have been perfect had it featured an HDCP chip, but sadly, this is absent. Even if you are not looking for a graphics card right now but are still using DX9 class hardware, it's well worth serious consideration. From a gaming point of view, however, there is no DX9 part that can match the 8800GTS 320MB in the sub 1,600 x 1,200 numbers. **NAG**

Neo Sibeko





ASUS X1950TX CROSSFIRE

THIS PAIR OF AMD'S best graphics solutions out there, in the form of a brace of ASUS X1950TX cards running in tandem, has been in the office for a while. This review was written a long time after the annals had been delivered – and there's a good reason for that. It's because this Crossfire setup is quite a tricky thing to get just right.

We'll kick off by complaining and moaning about that silly Crossfire Dongle you need to use for the two GTXs to communicate with each other. Fortunately, this archaic system is soon to be relegated to the annals of history, with lower-end ATI offerings already sporting an SLI-like bridge connector linking the PCBs directly for this purpose.

In the end, the major hurdle we had in setting up this Crossfire rig turned out to be no more than a power issue. Although both GPUs at full load should bring our test rig's consumption up to the 400-450W region, our 500W test PSU just wasn't up to the task of powering both cards. But then, even with the trusty office AOpen PrimaPower 700W doing its job, the screen of the XP machine we tested on would simply go blank whenever the dual-GPU display initialised.

With an updated Catalyst package (the latest at the time of going to press, Catalyst 7.2) and a small change to the BIOS of our Crossfire-capable Foxconn 975X7AA motherboard, which it seems is necessary to get Crossfire enabled, we finally got the rig powered up and displaying in Windows. We ran this setup under XP rather than Vista, as the latter impacts performance negatively in some games tests and positively in others, and more importantly, Vista's biggest pull for gamers, DX10, is useless with these ATI graphics cards installed.

In fact, we're going to reveal one of the most salient outcomes of this review right now, up front. It's this very fact, the lack of support for SM 4.0 and DX10, which murders this offering. For the price of two high-end graphics cards, and quite a bit more than a single 8000-series range-topper, you may be buying one of the speediest, most powerful GPU solutions on the planet – but it's old technology. Okay, the real impact of Vista and its DX10 subsystem will only be felt in a good few months towards

the middle or even end of this year we expect, but it's still a lot of money for components that will need updating in a year if you're to enjoy the latest raft of titles in full glory.

Stepping back a few yards though: Just how fast is the X1950TX Crossfire setup in our crop of benchmarks that comprise today's DX9-based software? Well, to be blunt, it's seriously blazing.

We tested the cards using a Pentium 965XE CPU and 1GB of Corsair DDR2 running at 940MHz. The CPU was clocked to its default 3.67GHz per core. For comparative purposes, we also had a newer-generation 8800 GTS and GTX, which we installed in the same rig and ran the exact same benchmarks on, both in single-card configurations.

Sure, pitting multi-GPU solutions against single cards might not be entirely fair, but frankly, the X1950TX is a last-generation part comparable to the 8800s, and competing with the older, dual-GPU 7950 GX2 would be a bit of a cakewalk for this ASUS pairing. Nevertheless, let's see what we came up with.

Our first benchmark run was in *Company of Heroes* at 1,280 x 1,024 as well as 1,600 x 1,200. The 8800 GTX scored the first hit, winning in both resolutions, with the X1950TX CF trailing quite some way behind (even the smaller, cheaper GTS outpaced it in this title). At the lower of our two resolutions, the GTX managed an average framerate of around 110fps. The Crossfire GPUs could only manage 71fps. However, our next game bench, using the superb 3D engine in *F.E.A.R.*, swapped the results around, and this time the ATI rig pulled convincingly ahead! It won in *F.E.A.R.* by about the same margin that the NVIDIA system had pulled off in *COH*.

From here on, however, things became a lot less clear-cut. *Doom 3*'s Timedemo gave the nod to the ATI options by a small margin. The identically engined *Quake 4* benchmark run swung back into NVIDIA's camp, and in *Far Cry* the two graphics subsystems were almost perfectly matched, with a miniscule framerate advantage to the Crossfire setup, but too small to be of consequence.

So it came down to the synthetic gamer's benchmark, 3DMark06 from Futuremark, to

SPECS

GPU:	R580+
CORE CLOCK:	650MHz
SHADER VERSION:	3.0
PIPELINES:	48
VIDEO MEMORY:	512MB GDDR4
MEMORY CLOCK:	1GHz
MEMORY BUS:	512-bit

SCORE



BETTER THAN:

Any other DX9-based single- or multi-GPU setup

WORSE THAN:

The 8800 series with its DX10 capabilities

try to identify the winner of this epic bout. The run completed and we had our result, but it was still by no means definitive between the X1950TXs and the 8800 GTX. However, the winner, by a nose at best, was the ATI setup.

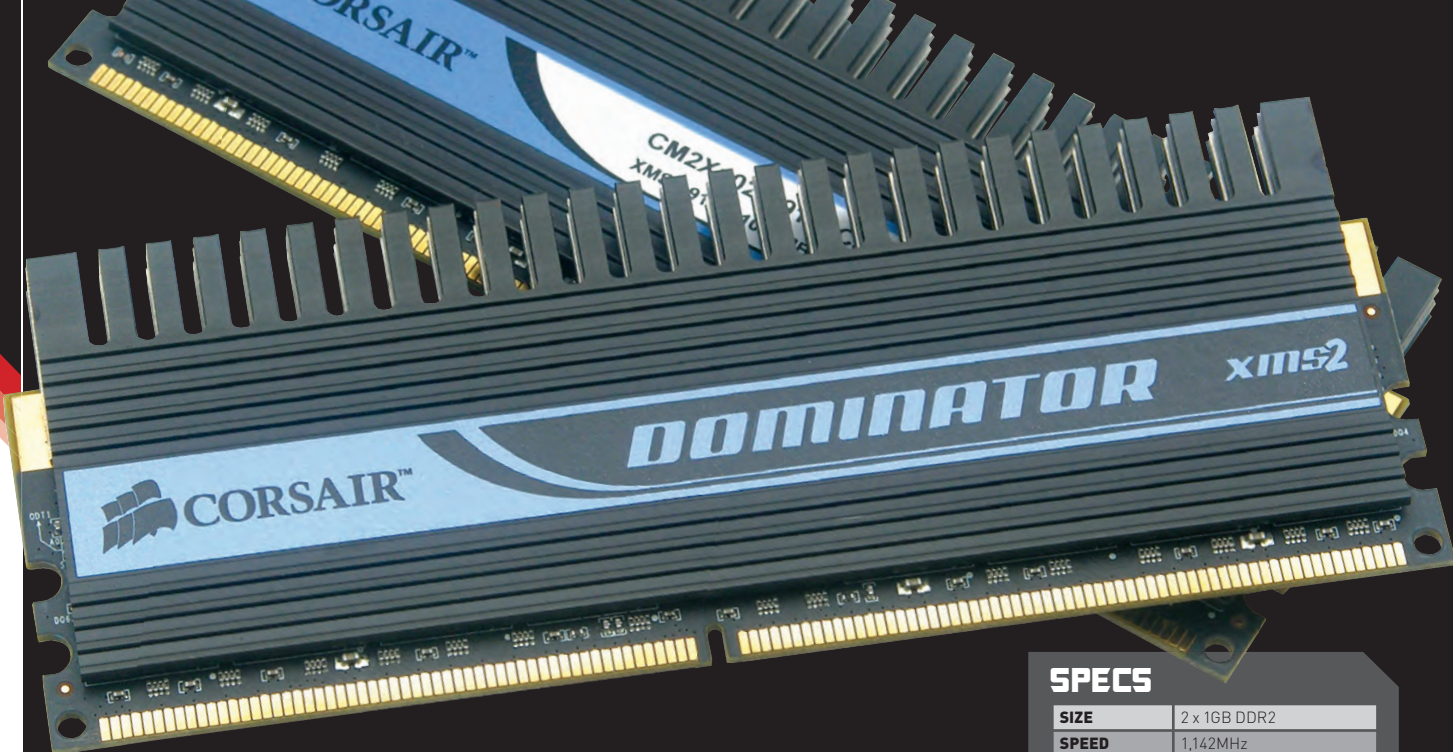
So, just what is it about the X1950TX that allows it to perform so admirably, given the differences in technology and architectures between it and the monstrous 8800 GTX? In addition, it should be noted that the R580+ core is pretty much exactly the same as the R580 from the X1900XT and sports almost half as many gates as the far larger, more complex NVIDIA die.

Firstly, the ultimate iteration of the R580 chipset means it's clocked a bit higher (650MHz) than its predecessors were. The second factor is the addition of support for the fastest memory available to OE graphics card manufacturers in the shape of GDDR4.

Considering that the performance of the solution is superb, with typically gorgeous ATI IQ, it's extremely unfortunate that we can't suggest that a hardcore gamer should rush out and buy the hardware. An 8800 GTX is, we're afraid, cheaper and faster in some games, although quite a lot slower in some others. Moreover, the kicker of it all, it will remain a viable card for the next 24 months at least due to support for the latest 3D standards from Microsoft.

How comprehensively this offering outguns NVIDIA's ultimate dual-GPU solutions from the same generation, however, still suggests that there's some magic in the old ATI brand, and we await the R600 core most eagerly. **NAG**

Russell Bennett



CORSAIR XMS2 DOMINATOR PC9136

CORSAIR IS NO NEWCOMER to manufacturing high-speed RAM. Almost everybody who has ever upgraded or assembled their own computer will attest to, at one point or another, wishing they owned or actually did own a set of corsair RAM. This is no surprise, because Corsair, besides being a member of the RAM standards body JEDEC, has always catered to the enthusiast market long before other players even came into existence. With years of expertise to pull from, Corsair has always managed to extend any PC standard into the next generation.

The latest series of dual-channel DDR2 kits from Corsair is no different. We were fortunate enough to receive a set of Corsair's Dominator PC9136 Dual Channel Kit. The RAM is set at an impressive 1,142MHz and at a very reasonable 5-5-5-15 timing, which is considered adequate even for DDR800. That Corsair managed to stretch the official DDR800 spec to well over 1GHz is nothing to snivel at.

Before we get into the performance of the set, the most impressive and probably the biggest selling point of the Dominator series is the new cooling mechanism, which is probably the greatest innovation of this set. The cooling mechanism used is dubbed 'DHX', which is actually more than a gimmick as it works really well. While there are many DDR1000 sets out there, almost all of them run at unsavoury temperatures that should concern even the extreme enthusiast. Most of these sets are too hot to touch by hand during operation, as the heatspreaders used are usually for aesthetic purposes more than they are for cooling.

The Corsair Dominator set differs in that it remained warm even at the rated speed of 1,142MHz at 2.2V. The RAM did get warm, but not enough to make one want to add active cooling (which is an option supported by Corsair) to better control the temperatures. While the cooling does make the RAM extraordinarily tall, it works wonders and relieves one of having to worry about what the heat is doing to the life expectancy of

the RAM. In this regard, Corsair has done a stellar job and others in the market would do well to follow suit, as this is by far better than any heatspreader ever used before save for the sets that make use of water-cooling.

As far as the performance of the set goes, one cannot help but be impressed, especially if you have a motherboard such as the ASUS P5B-Deluxe that overlock above 500MHz or other nForce 680i-based boards that have the ability to operate the RAM at almost any frequency set by the user. The bandwidth achieved by these chipsets, when using this RAM at the rated speed, is impressive, achieving figures above the 7GB/sec (and sometimes 8GB/sec) mark on our Intel test machine. Those who own AM2 machines will really see the advantage such high-speed RAM brings. With an FX-62 clocked at 3GHz, we were able to achieve a memory bandwidth of over 12GB/sec. This was almost double what we achieved on our Intel machine. This massive bandwidth may not be of much use right now on the AM2 platform, but when the new K10 core arrives in a couple of months, it will benefit immensely from such high-speed RAM.

What makes the Dominator set special isn't just the rated speed, but the speeds that can be achieved with a little tweaking. We were able to operate the RAM at an impressive 3-4-3-9 setting, which gave a huge boost in memory performance in particular where latency was concerned. This decrease in wait states had a bigger performance impact on our Intel machine than it did on our AMD machine. This is understandable, particularly when pulling large amounts of data to and from primary to non-volatile storage.

One area where the effects of high bandwidth can be useful is when gaming at high resolutions, where the amount of scene data is increased due to the larger meshes being streamed from main memory. The performance improvement is substantial enough on an AMD system, but is virtually nonexistent on an Intel X6800 platform.

SPECS

SIZE	2 x 1GB DDR2
SPEED	1,142MHz
TIMINGS	5-5-5-15 2.1V
FEATURES	EPP [Enhanced Performance Profile] DHX [Dual Path Heat eXchange]

SCORE



BETTER THAN:

Corsair XMS2 PC8000

WORSE THAN:

Corsair Dominator PC8888

The Dominator set does everything right except for one area, where things go so wrong that all the positives are basically nullified. It is the price: it is very steep when you consider that you could get other Corsair XMS2 sets that overlock to the same levels, but cost far less. Yes, most of these sets are not rated at 1,142MHz, but any set that can achieve 1,066MHz at 4-4-4-12 will deliver better performance than this set at 5-5-5-12 at the higher frequency. In fact, you could actually buy two sets of DDR800 4-4-4-12 that will easily run at 1,066MHz [4-4-4-12] for less than this single set.

It would be very hard to justify why anybody would buy this RAM, as even the hardened Corsair fan could arguably get better RAM in the regular XMS2 series.

Having said that, there are those people who have the resources and who operate their machines at breakneck speeds daily. In such an environment and for such users this set would be great, as there is no overlocking required for the RAM. If you are heavily into benchmarking, then this RAM will serve you well for the same reason as before. It just does 1,142MHz out of the box, which is great by any measure. DDR2 was never meant to scale well past the 1GHz mark, but Corsair has managed to pull it off quiet comfortably and it is a show of good engineering on their part. The benefit of the cooling mechanism makes the Dominator kit a part most people would be proud to show off. If you must have cutting-edge performance and cost is not a concern, then this set is for you.

NAG
Neo Sibeko



LOGITECH DINOVO EDGE

EMBLAZONED RIGHT THERE ON the front of this product's box, Logitech makes the bold claim that the diNovo Edge is "The world's most advanced keyboard." Let's take it for a spin then, shall we?

When I first saw this product at a Logitech "upcoming technology" presentation in the last quarter of last year, I was intrigued. Always the style-conscious hardware company, Logitech has gone ahead and created a deck that is peerless in the aesthetics department. Moreover, with the trend of home theatre PCs as an additional consumer appliance in the living room continuing to escalate, it's a sound approach for the future.

However, great looks alone won't convince us. Like a car that is drop-dead gorgeous from the exterior, the guts of the drive would make or break it in our eyes. Sure, the looks play a part, particularly in that last emotional

area, but without solid underpinnings, it'll always fall a bit short.

Fortunately, the diNovo Edge is actually more than just style for style's sake. Setting it up is fairly simple, even if you don't have the required Bluetooth connectivity on the machine you're using, thanks to the inclusion of a small black Bluetooth dongle in the box. The software is 40-odd megabytes to install, but this includes Logitech's SetPoint application, which does an amazing job of allowing you to complete customise the operations of the unit through an extremely user-friendly GUI.

This amazingly slim unit packs oodles of features that set it apart from 'lesser' offerings. However, let's start with the feel and operation of the keys themselves. The slim-line diNovo Edge initially feels like a laptop keyboard, but you quickly appreciate how much better the key presses feel than

FEATURES

CONNECTIVITY	Bluetooth
BATTERY	2 months (claimed)
DIMENSIONS	210mm x 400mm
EXTRAS	Recharge dock

SCORE



BETTER THAN:

Any other keyboard you've tried

WORSE THAN:

Rather bad for your wallet!



your average mobile PC. We've never been real fans of laptop keyboards in gaming, but this Logitech combines laptop size and manufacturing style with great feel.

You'll immediately notice, however, that there's no number pad to the right of the cursor area. This could be a problem for office workers doing a lot of Excel data entry, but it's unlikely that the average office workstation would warrant the price tag - well over R1,000! No, this is for the home user, or the HTPC market, not the average corporate worker.

In place of the number pad there's an ultra-cool volume slider - actually an orange-lit touch-sensitive 'line' totally integrated into the casing of the keyboard itself. It might seem a little chintzy, but we loved it, and for an HTPC it's an invaluable element! Just beneath this is the TouchDisc, which the company reckons eliminates the need for a separate mouse, similarly integrated into the case itself.

Don't get us wrong, the TouchDisc works a treat for navigating your OS. It just isn't exactly ideal for gaming of course, so you'll need a traditional mouse as well if you're using the Edge on your gaming rig. For an HTPC, however, it's a superb and elegant solution.

You'll also by now have noticed that no mess of 'Multimedia Keys' adorns the top row of the Edge, as is normally the case with modern high-end keyboards. These functions are there though; just hold in the 'Fn' key and soft orange lighting will illuminate the secondary functions of the F keys, which include useful shortcuts like e-mail and VoIP, as well as the normal array of multimedia operations.

The Edge is also, of course, completely wireless, with a docking station to recharge its built-in battery. Logitech claims that a full charge can last for up to two months. We didn't have the diNovo for that long, but we never had to charge it again in the week or so we used it. Besides, it's the easiest thing in the world to just slot it back into its cradle when you leave your PC for the evening,

recharging the battery while also saving some valuable desktop real estate as the keyboard sits upright in this unit rather than laying flat.

Bluetooth technology is labelled as for a Personal Area Network (PAN), which pertains to its limited range, but we were still able to use the Edge a good 10m or so away from the PC, which is more than enough in our opinion.

For such a pretty thing, this keyboard is quite tough too, and its aluminium casing and single-piece Perspex construction mean that it can take a few solid knocks and brush them off.

Our one real complaint is about the location of the two TouchDisc buttons, which rest below the pointing device itself on the right-hand edge of the deck. They're much trickier to operate than a laptop's, entirely due to their position on the layout of the deck. Still, you do get accustomed to them in time, even if it never feels entirely natural.

We have to confess: one of the things we adored about the diNovo Edge is that the keyboard layout itself is, well, so darned 'classic'. We aren't big fans of cluttering up a keyboard with useless extra keys, especially if that affects the traditional QWERTY layout. The diNovo Edge offers all the functionality of these busier designs but looks every inch the old-school 101-key deck, with a few unique and highly stylish extras.

Overall, the Logitech diNovo Edge scored very highly in our opinion. Not only is it ultra-sexy, but it feels in a class above any other keyboard you'll have used, and includes some awesome little gimmicks that enhance the feel-good factor. It's also completely user-customisable thanks to the excellent SetPoint application, and is wireless without having to worry about changing batteries, which we always like. It is, however, devilishly expensive. Worth the money?

Well in a way yes: if you're looking for a keyboard that is eminently functional but would also be a talking point at a social gathering for sheer style, it's the only offering to go for, and the price be damned! **NAG**

Russell Bennett

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BOSE



GIGABYTE 8800 GTX AND GTS

WHEN WE INITIALLY DID our roundup of the brand-new NVIDIA 8800-based graphics cards, when they were still brand spanking new, we were a little disappointed not to have received any review samples from our pals at Rectron, specifically from the strong Gigabyte brand that this distributor represents in our market. Better late than never we suppose, but it did give other well-known and even lesser-known manufacturers the head start with early adopters of this new DX10-capable architecture in SA.

They're here now, however, but as we all no doubt know by now, Gigabyte hasn't been able to do anything drastically different with its two offerings at all. There's the 640MB GTS and 768MB GTX, both looking identical to every 8800-series card we've seen to date, save for a different Gigabyte sticker adorning the cooler.

This is because, with the 8800-series, NVIDIA isn't selling the chipset separately for the OEMs to implement how they see fit. No, part of the 'bundle', when you get rights to manufacture these cards, is that you must stick to the letter to the reference design!

So how does Gigabyte go about differentiating its cards? Well it's an old method, but still fairly popular... They've gone and added some perceived value to their 8800-series bundle in the form of software. With this gamer-focussed card, they've included two full, fairly new games in the box. *Call of Juarez* isn't the best game, but it's fairly new and does give the GPU the

opportunity to impress the customer when it first fires up with decent visuals.

Civilization IV is the second title, included specially for this series of cards. It's a perplexing choice, as many younger gamers won't exactly find this title stunning, although in its own way it does pose quite a serious challenge to the hardware in your PC. *Civ IV* needs the RAM and CPU to run at its best.

Nevertheless, in our opinion, *Civ IV* is one of those games that every modern hardcore gamer really needs to own. It's one of those titles that you'll load again in two years time and still enjoy thoroughly. For its presence alone, the Gigabyte package is a brilliant bundle in our estimation! And the performance of the cards themselves, you ask?

As was always expected, the Gigabyte cards (GV-NX88X768H-RH and GV-NX88S640H-RH, respectively) performed exactly like their counterparts from other manufacturers, which in this case is no bad thing, as the 8800-series is undeniably the current king of the performance GPU pile by a solid margin.

Of course, they also support DX10 and SM 4.0, both boons for the longevity of the platform you're building.

Whichever of these cards you choose, you can rest assured that the latest games will be quite happy at high resolutions and with IQ-boosting features like AA and AF turned up. The GTS will obviously be the first to need these settings turned down, but the game will still look amazing, we assure you, and

NAG HARDWARE AWARDS



SPECS

	GTX	GTS
GPU	G80	G80
CORE CLOCK	575MHz	500MHz
SHADER VERSION	4.0	4.0
PIPELINES	128	96
VIDEO MEMORY	768MB GDDR3	640MB GDDR3
MEMORY CLOCK	900MHz	900MHz
MEMORY BUS	384-bit	320-bit

SCORE



BETTER THAN:

All the 8800-series cards out there that don't ship with *Civ IV*

WORSE THAN:

Nothing

will continue to run fine for at least the next 18 months.

The hardware might be identical, but Gigabyte just had to choose that game to include in its bundle, didn't it? For us, *Civ IV* is a bit of a legend, and if you don't already own your own copy, this Gigabyte package is a very good way of killing two birds with one stone. **NAG**

Russell Bennett



CREATIVE ZEN VISION W

CREATIVE IS BACK ON track to its former glory. The company, like many of its competitors, looked on confused and red-faced as Apple brought the mobile music market to a boom. You might think the aftermath was that many of these consumer electronics companies ran around trying to find the next big thing in portable devices, but in reality, they were going after the new market share that has opened. You didn't need another iPod, just a device that gave the portable-agnostic something more to carry with them. Video or MP4 players were the next to step up and they soon became more commonplace than anyone would have thought. Today you can find various brands offering to play your movies, with some better than others. It goes without saying, though, that a Creative branded product would put you into the higher end of the market.

This is definitely the case with the Zen Vision W, a nice 30GB media player that

boasts a very pretty screen, proper controls and nice playback, both internally and via RCA to a television. It also plays popular audio formats, and as a music player will give you quite a lot of hours of playback. As a video device less so, but still enough for two or so movies. For TV series, it worked fine, but any movie that uses the AC3 format (the standard for DVDs) wouldn't play audio – even after a firmware update. This kind of problem is more common with your more reputable players – dodgier brands tend to compensate with wider format support. However, I wish the media companies would realise that most people aren't interested in a DRM specification and the range of format support should be their primary focus (especially in this country). But only AC3 seemed to produce this problem – TV shows and other videos played quite happily and beautifully. All that really lacks from the package is a better carrier bag. **NAG**

James Francis

FEATURES

SCREEN	95mm x 55mm
STORAGE	30GB
OTHER	Compact Flash I & II slots
FORMATS	WMV, MPEG1-4, DivX4-5, Xvid, MP3
BATTERY	13 hours audio, 4.5 hours video
OUTPUT	Screen, Composite

SCORE



BETTER THAN:

Hauling your PC around with you to watch the latest episode of *Battlestar Galactica*

WORSE THAN:

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GECUBE RADEON X1950 PRO HDCP

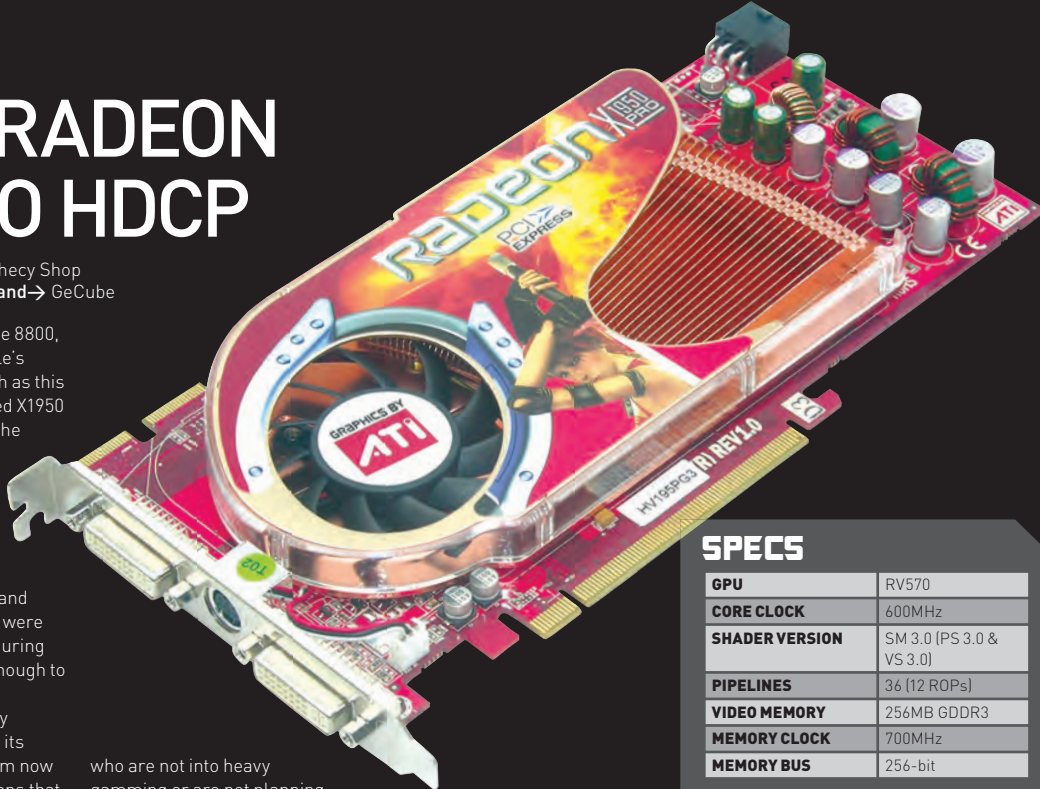
RRP→ R2,072 | Supplier→ The Prophecy Shop
Website→ www.prophecy.co.za | Brand→ GeCube

WITH AMD HAVING NOTHING to oust the 8800, its partners have to stay on people's minds through creative methods, such as this one: GeCube has released an improved X1950 range that features an HDCP chip so the cards can truly claim to be HDTV ready. However, it must be said that this is the only real addition to the regular X1950 PRO, which isn't a bad card at all. In fact, during testing the card performed very well in all modern games at 1,280 x 1,024, and some games (*Half-Life 2* and *Far Cry*) were playable at 1,600 x 1,200 with 4x AA. During testing, the card did get hot, but not enough to be worried about.

What GeCube has done has actually breathed life into a GPU that has seen its glory days and will only get slower from now on. The addition of the HDCP chip means that, should you have an HDTV and an HD content player, you can use this graphics card in a home theatre PC where it will shine because of its ability to play all the latest games and also deliver hardware-accelerated HD content playback. The video produced is of a better quality than that of some high-end standalone players. This seemingly minor addition to the graphics card has literally made this a worthwhile purchase for those

who are not into heavy gaming or are not planning on upgrading to Vista anytime this year. As far as HD output-ready graphics cards go, the GeCube X1950 PRO is right up there at the top, boasting a very important feature that is missing on some very expensive, new-generation graphics cards. At the given price, this is a worthwhile purchase and should last quite some time. **NAG**

Neo Sibeko



SPECS

GPU	RV570
CORE CLOCK	600MHz
SHADER VERSION	SM 3.0 (PS 3.0 & VS 3.0)
PIPELINES	36 (12 ROPs)
VIDEO MEMORY	256MB GDDR3
MEMORY CLOCK	700MHz
MEMORY BUS	256-bit

SCORE



BETTER THAN:
Regular X1950 PRO

WORSE THAN:
8800GTS 320MB

SAHARA NB726320 PENTIUM M LAPTOP

RRP→ R7,399 | Supplier→ Sahara
Website→ www.sahara.co.za | Brand→ Sahara

NOTEBOOKS HAVE BECOME a lot like cellphones. They are released at accelerated intervals too short to yield any kind of worthwhile technological advancements, and they cost more than they should. This kind of product methodology results in many average products flooding the market to create an ocean of mediocrity that only occasionally brings a vessel of discovery. Not that there is anything wrong with average, it's just harder to review average in any kind of context other than looking under the hood and going, "This one's faster than your other one." The NB726320 is average, and if you compared it to any other notebook in the same price range, your only real choice remaining would be deciding which colour you wanted. The NB wouldn't fail the standard test to check if it has the fundamentals: a screen that works; a DVD drive; some RAM; hard drive space; and somewhere to plug in your mouse. Full marks there, but no distinctions except perhaps for the hard drive (it has an 80GB HDD, putting it slightly ahead of the grade average). It doesn't feel as if it's going to come apart in your hands either, which scores it points for feeling rugged, but it's not good for gaming in any form apart from *Solitaire*. **NAG**

Miktar "Lapdog" Dracon



SPECS

PROCESSOR	Intel Pentium M 2.0GHz
MEMORY	512MB DDR2 (64MB shared with video RAM)
HDD	80GB
DISPLAY	14-inch
GRAPHICS	SiS Mirage (Integrated)
OPTICAL DRIVE	DVD-RAM
WARRANTY	1 year

SCORE



BENCHMARKS

PCMARK05

TOTAL SCORE	1,710
CPU	3,173
MEMORY	2,324
GRAPHICS	NA
HDD	2,950

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Vista ReadyBoost USB Flash Roundup

READYBOOST IS AN INTERESTING concept that comes as part of Vista. It uses a flash disk to augment a system's RAM in an attempt to deliver faster performance. The way it does this is to duplicate some or all of the system's swap file on the flash device. Normally, when main system RAM is exhausted, the OS will swap to the hard drive, moving memory between the drive and RAM transparently to applications. However, hard drives are far slower than RAM, so we've become familiar with the 'churn' of a system making heavy use of a swap file.

The reason ReadyBoost uses flash memory to try and help speed up this process is that flash memory is often far faster than a hard drive in random access. Even though sequential file transfers are normally faster to a disk, flash drives are solid-state devices with no moving parts, so they can find and retrieve small amounts of data more quickly than a mechanical hard disk that has to move

a read/write head and spin platters. Obviously, the smaller the system RAM and the larger and faster the flash drive, the better this works. Microsoft recommends a 1:1 RAM to flash ratio minimum and a 1:2.5 maximum.

However, all is not what it seems in the world of flash drives. In the quest for ever higher speed numbers to put on the box, many tricks have been found that can improve sequential speed, but sacrifice random access speed to do it. Multiple chips in a dual- or even quad-channel setup internally can improve transfer speeds, but a cheap controller chip can cause a setup like this to have sluggish access times. In some cases, only part of the drive uses high-speed memory, and the rest is much slower, so at first it may seem quite impressive but won't hold up when used heavily.

Vista detects scenarios such as these by testing a drive as soon as it is plugged in. The

specs require 2.5MB/sec read of 4K random blocks, 1.75MB/sec write of 512-byte random blocks, and a minimum of 235MB free space. If the drive passes, you'll get the option to allocate some of its space for ReadyBoost. If not, you can try testing it again, but we found this rarely changes things. Newer flash drives will likely come with logos indicating that they support ReadyBoost (and we have one in this roundup that does), but most of the ones currently on the market don't, and it's difficult to know which drive will or won't work since manufacturers usually only have sequential speeds mentioned on the package, never random access times.

Therefore, we've rounded up the flash drives we could and put them to the test. Those looking for a ReadyBoost drive will want to pay attention, lest they wind up with an expensive drive that doesn't cut it. **NAG**

Toby Hudson

A-DATA PD7

Supplier → Corex | Website → www.corex.co.za
RRP → R454.86

If we wanted to save the best for last, we'd have to sort this list in reverse alphabetical order. The drive itself is deceptively humble. Its silver and purple scheme and typical Space Devil packaging* may cause it to be overlooked at first glance, but under this mild-mannered exterior and reasonably solid weight and feel a speed demon lurks. The PD7 blew away the competition, taking the best scores across the entire board. Whether you're using it for ReadyBoost or just copying files, it's an outstanding choice.

* <http://www.penny-arcade.com/comic/2002/09/30>



BENCHMARKS

SEQUENTIAL READ →	29.0MBs
SEQUENTIAL WRITE →	22.0MBs
4K RANDOM READ →	4.0MBs
512 BYTE RANDOM WRITE →	0.0MBs
4K READ IOPS →	1,010.0
512 BYTE WRITE IOPS →	44.0
READ ACCESS TIME →	1.0ms
WRITE ACCESS TIME →	22.8ms
READYBOOST CHECK →	PASS

A-DATA PD8

Supplier → Corex | Website → www.corex.co.za
RRP → R450.30

Numbers can be deceiving, and as far as we can tell, the PD8 has little relation to the PD7. First of all, it's translucent blue. It also has a cap that seems to be welded on. It still comes in the same packaging with an extension cable, but performance-wise it was a night and day difference from the drive one number before. Vista seems to agree, and it failed the internal ReadyBoost test.



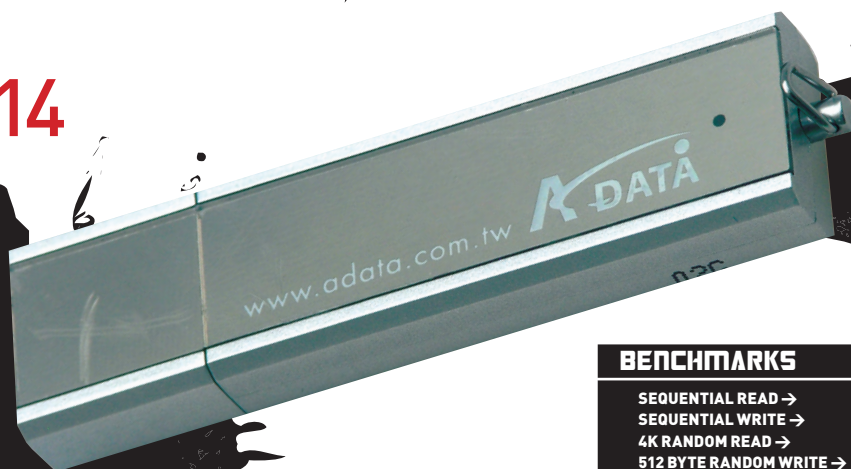
BENCHMARKS

SEQUENTIAL READ →	20.0MBs
SEQUENTIAL WRITE →	10.0MBs
4K RANDOM READ →	0.1MBs
512 BYTE RANDOM WRITE →	0.0MBs
4K READ IOPS →	26.0
512 BYTE WRITE IOPS →	12.0
READ ACCESS TIME →	38.3ms
WRITE ACCESS TIME →	86.0ms
READYBOOST CHECK →	FAIL

A-DATA PD14

Supplier → Corex | Website → www.corex.co.za
RRP → R564.30

Continuing our A-Data streak is the PD14, which looks a bit like a shinier version of the PD7. It's the only drive in our roundup that came with an "Enhanced for ReadyBoost" logo on the package. It did what it claims and passed the ReadyBoost internal test with flying colours. However, despite being one of the better drives in the roundup, it doesn't seem to have the same speed as the PD7, which is a bit disappointing, especially since this drive costs R100 more. Oh, and the shiny surface scratches quite easily, which isn't too nice.



BENCHMARKS

SEQUENTIAL READ →	18.0MBs
SEQUENTIAL WRITE →	10.0MBs
4K RANDOM READ →	0.9MBs
512 BYTE RANDOM WRITE →	0.0MBs
4K READ IOPS →	232.0
512 BYTE WRITE IOPS →	27.0
READ ACCESS TIME →	4.3ms
WRITE ACCESS TIME →	37.6ms
READYBOOST CHECK →	PASS

A-DATA PD15

Supplier → Corex | Website → www.corex.co.za
RRP → R285

Good things come in small packages. Sometimes. The PD15 is pretty small, though not quite the smallest drive we tested. It's one of those 'caseless' flash drives that have the USB pins directly exposed, so you may want to be wary of shoving it in a pocket stuffed with metal objects, like keys. It weighs practically nothing, and it comes with nothing else in the package. Despite very good read scores, the extremely slow write speed (both sequential and random) caused it to fail ReadyBoost testing.



BENCHMARKS

SEQUENTIAL READ →	13.0MB/s
SEQUENTIAL WRITE →	2.5MB/s
4K RANDOM READ →	3.9MB/s
512 BYTE RANDOM WRITE →	0.0MB/s
4K READ IOPS →	999.0
512 BYTE WRITE IOPS →	7.0
READ ACCESS TIME →	1.0ms
WRITE ACCESS TIME →	133.9ms
READYBOOST CHECK →	FAIL

A-DATA SD DUO CARD SUPER 80X

Supplier → Corex | Website → www.corex.co.za
RRP → R678.30

The name of this part is a bit of a mouthful, but the card itself is barely one. This is probably the most versatile entry in the roundup, as it's both a USB stick and an SD card. Rather than using a hinge system that could potentially break, A-Data has a cap that slides over the USB pins to protect them and also completes the SD card shape. Very handy if you use many devices that take SD cards, but don't want to carry around cables and readers. Performance was respectable, though not amazing, but it did pass Vista's ReadyBoost test with flying colours.



BENCHMARKS

SEQUENTIAL READ →	14.0MB/s
SEQUENTIAL WRITE →	6.5MB/s
4K RANDOM READ →	0.5MB/s
512 BYTE RANDOM WRITE →	0.0MB/s
4K READ IOPS →	129.0
512 BYTE WRITE IOPS →	35.0
READ ACCESS TIME →	7.7ms
WRITE ACCESS TIME →	28.4ms
READYBOOST CHECK →	PASS

KINGMAX SUPER STICK

Supplier → Esquire | Website → www.esquire.co.za
RRP → R283.86

If you're looking for small, you can stop here. The Super Stick is the smallest USB flash drive we've seen yet, and it still has the same capacity as most of the other drives. It also comes in a tube, and includes a strap so you hopefully won't lose it, which can be a real problem. The downside is that its sequential performance was middle of the pack and lower in the random tests. We really liked this thing, but it failed Vista's ReadyBoost check.



BENCHMARKS

SEQUENTIAL READ →	17.0MB/s
SEQUENTIAL WRITE →	6.5MB/s
4K RANDOM READ →	1.0MB/s
512 BYTE RANDOM WRITE →	0.0MB/s
4K READ IOPS →	250.0
512 BYTE WRITE IOPS →	6.0
READ ACCESS TIME →	4.0ms
WRITE ACCESS TIME →	180.9ms
READYBOOST CHECK →	FAIL

A-DATA ORIENTAL ELITE

Supplier → Corex | Website → www.corex.co.za
RRP → R564.30

A-Data has another contender, the Oriental Elite stick. This one is the only flash stick to come in an actual box, instead of Space Devil packaging. In the box are a nice cord and two stick-on faceplates, so you can change the look of it. Despite the focus on looks, this drive performed pretty well in the tests, and passed ReadyBoost testing without a problem.



BENCHMARKS

SEQUENTIAL READ →	26.5MB/s
SEQUENTIAL WRITE →	11.0MB/s
4K RANDOM READ →	0.9MB/s
512 BYTE RANDOM WRITE →	0.0MB/s
4K READ IOPS →	222.0
512 BYTE WRITE IOPS →	20.0
READ ACCESS TIME →	4.5ms
WRITE ACCESS TIME →	49.6ms
READYBOOST CHECK →	PASS

PLEOMAX ULTRA HIGH SPEED 1GB

Supplier → Proton | Website → www.protontech.co.za
RRP → R291.84

Pleomax is a rebranding of Samsung's flash memory. It's even indicated as such on the box, so you can be sure what you're getting inside. It's very small, but not one of those exposed pin types, so it can probably withstand a bit more abuse. It also comes with a thick cord and a plastic case designed to keep it intact. If only it didn't perform so badly. Even the sequential performance was lacklustre, and Vista quickly gave it the rejection stamp. No ReadyBoost for you Samsung, sorry!



BENCHMARKS

SEQUENTIAL READ →	12.0MB/s
SEQUENTIAL WRITE →	4.0MB/s
4K RANDOM READ →	0.1MB/s
512 BYTE RANDOM WRITE →	0.0MB/s
4K READ IOPS →	32.0
512 BYTE WRITE IOPS →	19.0
READ ACCESS TIME →	31.5ms
WRITE ACCESS TIME →	53.1ms
READYBOOST CHECK →	FAIL

CANYON RUBBER FLASH DRIVE

Supplier → ASBIS | Website → www.asbis.co.za
RRP → R228

Canyon seems to be interested in making flash drives out of different materials. The rubber drive is a pretty good idea; it should withstand shocks like being dropped quite well. The drive is pretty no-frills. It includes the typical strap but nothing really special. In the benchmarks, it was also nothing special. It wound up in the middle in the sequential tests, and unfortunately also failed ReadyBoost testing.



BENCHMARKS

SEQUENTIAL READ →	17.0MB/s
SEQUENTIAL WRITE →	7.0MB/s
4K RANDOM READ →	1.0MB/s
512 BYTE RANDOM WRITE →	0.0MB/s
4K READ IOPS →	251.0
512 BYTE WRITE IOPS →	6.0
READ ACCESS TIME →	4.0ms
WRITE ACCESS TIME →	175.3ms
READYBOOST CHECK →	FAIL

LEGEND THUMB DRIVE

Supplier → Legend | Website → www.legendmemory.com
RRP → R119.70

Legend's offering looks like one of those generic coloured USB drives with the pivoting metal shroud that you see almost everywhere. That's probably because it is one of those. This one happens to be red, and comes with a keychain. Not that exciting. The performance matches perfectly and is not that exciting. This drive had the lowest sequential read speed in the test, though the write speed was still respectable. Still, it's too slow for ReadyBoost.



BENCHMARKS

SEQUENTIAL READ →	9.0MB/s
SEQUENTIAL WRITE →	7.0MB/s
4K RANDOM READ →	0.1MB/s
512 BYTE RANDOM WRITE →	0.0MB/s
4K READ IOPS →	27.0
512 BYTE WRITE IOPS →	13.0
READ ACCESS TIME →	36.5ms
WRITE ACCESS TIME →	79.3ms
READYBOOST CHECK →	FAIL

ESQUIRE THUMB DRIVE

Supplier → Esquire | Website → www.esquire.co.za
RRP → R226.86

It's déjà vu in blue! Esquire's thumb drive looks almost exactly like Legend's, only blue, a bit shorter, and with a loop for a cord at the end. Oh, and it also has Esquire printed on it. However, it actually performed worse overall. The read speed was slightly better, but this drive produced the slowest sequential write speeds of the bunch. Filling up the 2GB of this disk will take you quite a while at 2MB/sec.



BENCHMARKS

SEQUENTIAL READ →	10.0MB/s
SEQUENTIAL WRITE →	2.0MB/s
4K RANDOM READ →	0.2MB/s
512 BYTE RANDOM WRITE →	0.0MB/s
4K READ IOPS →	54.0
512 BYTE WRITE IOPS →	6.0
READ ACCESS TIME →	18.4ms
WRITE ACCESS TIME →	156.1ms
READYBOOST CHECK →	FAIL

KINGMAX MAXDRIVE II

Supplier → Esquire | Website → www.esquire.co.za
RRP → R283.86

This Kingmax drive looks like a typical USB stick. It's made of generic silver plastic and weighs next to nothing. This, combined with the easily visible seams of the plastic casing, was a bit unsettling, since the drive looks like it won't stand up to much abuse. We were very careful with it, and yet it turned out to be the only drive in the test that had an actual problem. After we finished our benchmarking, the drive complained of errors the next time it was inserted, and eventually it died and had to be formatted. Formatting seemed to fix it, but we're a bit concerned about what would have happened had that been real data and not a temporary file for benchmarking. The performance was low, although random reads were quite fast for some reason. Nevertheless, Vista didn't like it any better than we did and it failed ReadyBoost testing.



BENCHMARKS

SEQUENTIAL READ →	11.0MB/s
SEQUENTIAL WRITE →	2.5MB/s
4K RANDOM READ →	3.3MB/s
512 BYTE RANDOM WRITE →	0.0MB/s
4K READ IOPS →	851.0
512 BYTE WRITE IOPS →	7.0
READ ACCESS TIME →	1.2ms
WRITE ACCESS TIME →	141.5ms
READYBOOST CHECK →	FAIL

PLEOMAX ULTRA HIGH SPEED 2GB

Supplier → Proton | Website → www.protontech.co.za
RRP → R565.44

Pleomax is back, this time with 2GB! We considered dropping either this drive or the 1GB version, since they appeared to be identical drives. Externally they are - the only difference is the number on the package it comes in. However, the benchmarks tell a different story. While the 1GB version wasn't fast enough to pass ReadyBoost, the 2GB isn't fast enough to pass wind. It managed to escape being the absolute worst in sequential read or write, but the random access times are ludicrous. We're not sure what Samsung did with this drive, but it probably needs a new name.



BENCHMARKS

SEQUENTIAL READ →	10.0MBs
SEQUENTIAL WRITE →	3.0MBs
4K RANDOM READ →	0.0MBs
512 BYTE RANDOM WRITE →	0.0MBs
4K READ IOPS →	8.0
512 BYTE WRITE IOPS →	4.0
READ ACCESS TIME →	125.0ms
WRITE ACCESS TIME →	259.5ms
READYBOOST CHECK →	FAIL

CANYON ALUMINIUM FLASH DRIVE

Supplier → ASBIS | Website → www.asbis.co.za
RRP → R376.20

Our only 4GB entry, the aluminium drive from Canyon, has a hefty, solid feel. It can probably take at least as much beating as their rubber drive too. This drive did okay in the sequential test, and we had hopes for ReadyBoost given the fast random reads. However, the random write speed killed it. Vista won't approve a drive unless it measures up in every way, and this drive's random write speeds are just too low to make it.



BENCHMARKS

SEQUENTIAL READ →	17.0MBs
SEQUENTIAL WRITE →	6.5MBs
4K RANDOM READ →	3.9MBs
512 BYTE RANDOM WRITE →	0.0MBs
4K READ IOPS →	1004.0
512 BYTE WRITE IOPS →	5.0
READ ACCESS TIME →	1.0ms
WRITE ACCESS TIME →	185.8ms
READYBOOST CHECK →	FAIL

EUROTEK SLIDER

Supplier → Eurobyte | Website → www.eurobyte.co.za
RRP → R1100

The name of this drive is deceptive, since it doesn't actually have a slide-out USB connector that we've seen some newer flash drives offering overseas. It just has a regular translucent cap that's as hard to get off as the PD8's. That's not the only deception here either. At first, we were impressed when the drive was showing 32MB/sec sequential reads. However, we were getting inconsistent results in various tests. After a closer look, we found that this drive has memory of two different speeds internally. The early part of the drive is fast, and the rest is slow. Eventually, we managed to get average results that were good on reads and average on writes, but no match for the PD7. Vista was also wise to these tricks and gave this drive an F for cheating on the ReadyBoost test.



BENCHMARKS

SEQUENTIAL READ →	24.0MBs
SEQUENTIAL WRITE →	11.0MBs
4K RANDOM READ →	1.0MBs
512 BYTE RANDOM WRITE →	0.0MBs
4K READ IOPS →	243.0
512 BYTE WRITE IOPS →	5.0
READ ACCESS TIME →	4.1ms
WRITE ACCESS TIME →	197.7ms
READYBOOST CHECK →	FAIL



Get Wide!!

Broader viewing angle and brighter colors with ASUS widescreen LCD monitors

Move on from the Stone Age and let us welcome you to the 21st Century with the latest display technology. Widescreen is the name of the game when it comes to comfortable viewing and picture quality. Those of you who are still stubbornly sticking with traditional format monitors really need to read the following. Find out what you have been missing, and what ASUS' latest widescreen displays have to offer.

MW221U and MW201U - 2ms response time and HDCP technology

The 22" MW221U delivers 1680x1050 high resolution, and its screen size equals two A4 sized pages side by side, meaning ample screen space for opening multiple applications and viewing windows. Trace Free Technology accelerates response time to 2ms, the fastest among 22" widescreen LCDs, to eliminate ghosting and video delays during movies or games. Teamed with HDCP support via DVI input, the MW series ensures video signal integrity and image representation quality. And let's not forget the stereo speakers and earphone jacks for various audio needs. The 20" MW201U is also available.



Trace Free Technology accelerates response time to 2ms, the fastest among 22" widescreen LCDs, to eliminate ghosting and video delays during movies or games.

What is HDCP (High-Bandwidth Digital Content Protection)?

HDCP (High-Bandwidth Digital Content Protection) protects digital content, which is transmitted to displays through the DVI interface. HDCP encrypts the transmission of digital content between the video source (i.e. a computer, DVD player or set-top box) and the digital display (i.e. a monitor, television or projector) and ensures video signal integrity and image quality.

VW192 - 19" widescreen for work and entertainment

The VW192 19" series, 16:10 widescreen LCD offers wide viewing angle, 5ms response time, 330-nit brightness and 800:1 contrast ratio (max.). Built-in stereo speakers, found in VW192T and VW192S, are included to deliver a video display solution that is also capable of high-quality audio experience. The stylish contour and detachable base for easy wall mount make the VW192 suitable for both home and office usages.



Built-in stereo speakers are included to deliver a video display solution that is also capable of high-quality audio experience.

PW191 and PW201-The most innovative widescreens and well-recommended by media

The PW191 was created with viewing comfort in mind. The aluminum pivot neck enables easy adjustment of tilt angle and height most suitable for different sitting positions. In addition, it permits display rotation for both landscape (for movies, Excel) and portrait (for photos, website browsing) viewing.

The PW201 is a multifunctional LCD monitor with wide viewing angle, built-in 1.3M pixels webcam, rich audio and versatile video inputs, picture-in-picture function as well. It is not just a display, but a right-out-of-the-box video conferencing solution as well.



The aluminum pivot neck enables easy adjustment of tilt angle and height most suitable for different sitting positions.



Built-in 1.3M pixel webcam makes it ideal for both work and play



Splendid Video Intelligence Technology

ASUS solutions, detects activation and usage of video applications and automatically optimizes image quality for the best visual results. Besides the five modes (Standard, Game, Theater, Scenery and Night), the innovative technology also enables the selection of three skin tone options for high-quality image in different video applications. Watching videos with computers and LCD monitors are now as good as on the best TVs, especially with larger size wide screen.

Why Widescreen?

Advantage 1: Most comfortable to human eyes

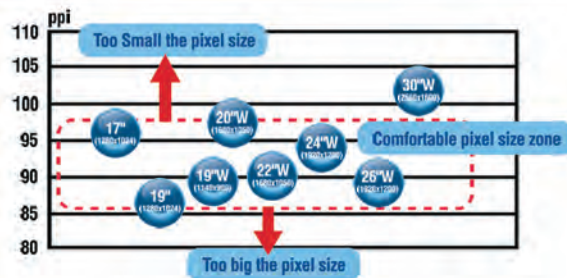
Widescreen offers the most natural and comfortable display format, because the viewing angle of human eyes is wider horizontally than vertically. 20" widescreen will be roughly the same height as 17" standard format monitors but 28% wider, and 22" widescreen will be 27% wider than 19" standard format displays. While offering higher image resolution, this larger format also shares similar viewing distance as standard formats.

Size	Active Area	Distance
17"	338 x 270mm	50.4cm
19"	376 x 301mm	56.2cm
20"	408 x 306mm	57.1cm
19W	410 x 256mm	47.8cm
20W	434 x 271mm	50.9cm
22W	474 x 296mm	55.2cm
24W	518 x 324mm	59.7cm
26W	550 x 344mm	63.0cm

While offering higher image resolution, this larger format also shares similar viewing distance as standard formats.

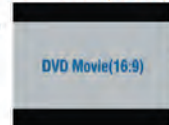
Advantage 2: Theatre-level experience

Widescreens are made for 16:9 DVD and can deliver excellent image quality even as the display becomes larger. Video images fit perfectly on the screen without large empty black spaces and distortions.



Video images fit perfectly on the screen without large empty black spaces and distortions.

Standard Screen(4:3 or 5:4)



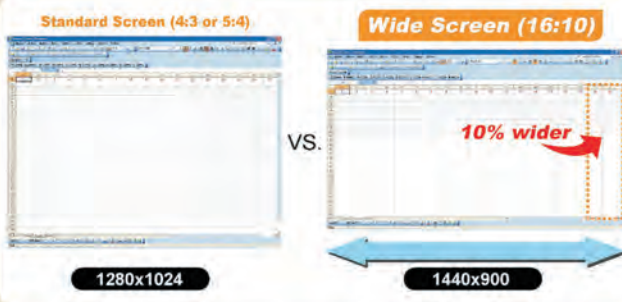
VS.

Wide Screen(16:10)



Advantage 3: Increase productivity with larger space

Widescreen is suitable for large spreadsheets, multiple windows, or two Word files displayed side by side.



Widescreen offers more space



> GAME ON! >

From 21 October 2006 until 25 February 2007, the London Science Museum presented *Game On*, an exhibition that, according to programmes director, Gaetan Lee, “traces the science behind the dramatic developments in computer game production over the last 30 years and tackles some of the serious issues behind this huge multi-billion pound industry.” Well yeah, that and there were over 120 fired-up and fully playable games gracing the exhibition floor. We went along to soak up the nostalgia, look important, and shove small children out of the way to get to *Missile Command*.

THE FIRST AREA OF the exhibit is Early Arcade, and the first thing that catches our eyeballs upon entry is a hideous blue colossus from the Dark Ages, Digital Equipment Corporation's PDP-1 (Programmable Data Processor). It comprises several large cabinets (one of which is its 0.0002GHz processor) outputting to a round monitor that looks rather like a porthole that lost its way. Its imposing presence notwithstanding, this machine played original host to *Spacewar* (1962), created by Steve “Slug” Russell and his pals in the Tech Model Railway Club over at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and generally acknowledged as the first shoot-'em-up.

This game quickly spread around campuses, eventually appearing at the University of Utah where it impressed an engineering student named Nolan Bushnell, who, apparently inspired, went off and converted his daughter's bedroom into a game laboratory. Together with Ted Dabney, he created the first commercially produced coin-operated (and glitter-veneered) arcade game, a *Spacewar* clone called *Computer Space* (1971). This machine comprised a monitor, circuit board, control panel, speaker, and power supply – establishing a design configuration that remains virtually unchanged even today – but, remarkably, has no microprocessor, ROM, or RAM. While it was a spectacular and trendsetting bit of cabinet design, the game flopped because it was too difficult to actually play. Undaunted, this enterprising pair went on to found Atari, and in November 1972 released *PONG* to widespread acclaim, effectively launching the commercial videogame industry. The rest of that story is somewhat self-evident.

Commanding attention in the centre of this room with their magical sparkly lights and cheery blips are eighteen mint-condition arcade cabinets, housing classics like *Centipede*, *Space Invaders*, *Galaga*, *Berzerk*, *Xevious*, *Asteroids*, *Dig Dug*, and *Galaxian*. Also scattered

about is a boggling display of weird early computers and consoles, including Ralph Baer's Brown Box (the first home console, later licensed to Magnavox and renamed the Odyssey), a Sony MSX HitBit-75P running *Metal Gear 1*, an NEC PC-Engine/TurboGrafx-16, the venerable Commodore 64 and Amiga, and various incarnations of Atari's Video Computer System. There's even an obnoxiously yellow original *PONG* cabinet. Because the exhibition had been running for some time prior to our illustrious visit, however, we were unable to snag a high score.

Strolling on into the next area, we're treated to an arresting array of games on SEGA Mega Drive, Dreamcast, and Saturn, Sony PSone, SNES and GameCube, Microsoft Xbox, Atari Jaguar, PC, and probably several other platforms that we didn't notice in all the foaming excitement over the framed concept art from *Monkey Island*. We were momentarily startled by how bad PSone graphics look these days, but swiftly distracted by a cool cockpit-styled cabinet of the old vector-based *Star Wars* (1983), complete with a glitchy voice-over by Harrison Ford, and the enormously confusing *Discs of Tron* (1983), sporting too many controls, a demonic voice-over, and a tacky neon grid overlay. There's an Atari 2600 running its best-selling title *Pitfall* (1982), a decidedly primitive-looking *Sim City* on SNES, and the irredeemably awful *PaRappa the Rapper 2* on PS2. Snuggled in a corner is Infocom's text-based classic, *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* (1984), currently commandeered by a slack-jawed track-suited lout who is utterly stymied by the very first puzzle – to turn on a light. Despite no dearth of pointed coughing and hissing from behind, he relentlessly re-enters ‘get candle’, and denies us the chance to razzle-dazzle onlookers with the evidently esoteric command ‘turn on light’.

Elsewhere nearby is a peculiar and rather ugly plain wooden cabinet featuring the ultra-rare VEB Polytechnik's *Poly Play*, the second of only two arcade games developed under communism,



IM IN UR UNIVERSITIEZ, PIONEERING UR GAMEZ

The earliest recorded graphical videogame was a tic-tac-toe simulation called *OXO*, developed and programmed by A.S. Douglas in 1952, as part of his PhD on computer-human interaction at the University of Cambridge. The controller was a rotary phone dialler, and this technological marvel was displayed in all its eye-popping monochromatic glory on a 35 x 16px military-issue CRT tank monitor. It failed to capture the public imagination, however, as its resident platform – the 500KHz ESDAC behemoth – was unique to the University, making it perhaps the very first victim of myopic videogame marketing.



IM IN UR UNIVERSITIES, STEALING UR MONIEZ

The first (non-commercial) coin-operated arcade game was installed at Stanford University in September 1971, pre-dating *Computer Space* by just two months. Created by Bill Pitts, a recent Stanford graduate and early hacker, and his high school pal Hugh Tuck, the one-of-a-kind *Galaxy Game* was yet another clone of the PDP-1's *Spacewar!*, incorporating the newer PDP-11/20 minicomputer with 8KB core memory, and costing a staggering \$20,000 to manufacture. The game proved an enormously powerful distraction from lectures until it was removed in May 1979, making it perhaps the very first victim of "No more games until your homework is done."

one of only three surviving units, and produced in East Germany sometime between 1985 and 1989. Due to the short supply of construction materials available at the time, each machine was cobbled together using whatever the company could get their hands on, making each one slightly different. Powered by a Soviet clone of the Zilog Z80 8-bit processor (notably resident in the Sinclair ZX80, ZX81 and ZX Spectrum, while the Commodore 64 had an optional external expansion slot for one) clocked at 2.457600MHz, the machine features a single button and 8-way joystick, a modified East German TV-set monitor trotting out a resolution of 512 x 256, and a palette of ten colours. Since coin-operated games were considered a little too vulgar and capitalist a concept (the machine was, in fact, frequently run with a deactivated coin slot), the game makers had to pander to the tastes of German Democratic Republic chancellor Erich Honeker. A game called *Hirshjagd* ('Deer Hunt'), therefore, was included as this was a favourite pastime of the East German leader. Other games include *Pac-Man* clone *Hase und Wolf* ('Hare and Wolf'), *Wasserrohrbruch* ('Water Pipe Break'), and *Autorennen* ('Car Race'). Although the machine is unfortunately not operational, the games are reportedly rubbish.

Moving onward and there's a surprisingly meagre display of games in the Multiplayer room. There's a four-way *Halo 2* setup, *Warlords* on an Atari VCS, Sega's *Saturn Bomberman*, Nintendo 64 classic *Super Smash Bros*, and a really bizarre Japanese Eye Toy party-style game that mostly involves waving your hands around and looking a bit silly.

The final area of the exhibition houses a dazzling collection of handhelds and peripherals, including the battery-guzzling Atari Lynx, Epoch's clunky Barcode Battler, Sega's Game Gear, a Milton Bradley Microvision, and the awesome-looking but wildly impractical Nintendo Power Glove, as well as early tabletop plastic mini-cabinets like *Frogger*, *Ms. Pac-Man*, and *Donkey Kong*. One side of this room boasts gigantic digital projections of *Guitar Hero* for PS2, and *Rockstar*



THINGS WE MANAGED TO LEARN IN BETWEEN ROUNDS OF BUST-A-MOVE

- Guybrush Threepwood, the bumbling pirate wannabe of *Monkey Island* fame, was so named because the program used to create the sprite, Deluxe Paint, saved the file for the as-yet unnamed character as guy.brush. The surname Threepwood appears in several of prolific English writer P.G. Wodehouse's novels, and was decided on a company vote.
- Released in 1989 for the Apple II, *Prince of Persia* was the first game to use rotoscoping, a technique in which animators trace frame-by-frame over live action film. Developer Jordan Mechner spent hours studying footage of his younger brother running and jumping, to ensure that his animation looked realistic. It doesn't look like much now, but the princess's swishing skirt dropped jaws at the time.
- Infocom's *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* game originally shipped with a number of curious items (or 'feelies'), including a scrap of fluff in a tiny plastic packet, a 'Don't Panic!' badge, an order for Earth's destruction written in Vogon, and an empty plastic baggie labelled "Official Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy Microscopic Space Fleet." This game also featured one of early gaming's most notorious puzzles, the "Babel Fish Dispenser." While failure to solve the puzzle would not kill the player, it would deviously – and unbeknown to the player – render the game unwinnable. Its subsequent notoriety prompted Infocom to produce a T-shirt proclaiming "I got the Babel Fish!"



Games Presents Table Tennis on the Xbox 360. In a cordoned-off area, surrounded by gawking onlookers and requiring an additional (free) time-stamped ticket for entry, are *Wii Tennis* and some crazy PS3 shooter that we couldn't even bite and bully our way close enough to identify. Also occupying this room are several booths displaying concept art and trivia for a number of games, including the *Sims* and *Tomb Raider* franchises.

Notably absent from the exhibition are any of those gore-grinding guns-and-giblets type games we all know and love. While this is somewhat understandable given the family nature of a museum exhibit, it's nonetheless a pity that such groundbreaking and influential titles like *Mortal Kombat*, *Doom* and *Quake* go unacknowledged, while the only evidence of the legendary *GTA* series is (an admittedly fascinating) display of original storyboards on yellow Post-Its, some concept artwork, and a baseball bat with *Grand Theft Auto III* emblazoned across its business end. With gaming culture under fire from moral authorities, it's a shame that the genre is avoided altogether instead of responsible and informative representation for attending parents (or clergy).

Also somewhat under-subscribed are PC games, with the disappointing absence of games like Sierra's *Mystery House* (1980), the first adventure game ever to feature graphics, and *King's Quest 1* (1984), a title that revolutionised graphical computer games with its 16-colour palette and animated characters, and set the company back a respectable \$700,000. Real-time strategy gaming, primarily a PC genre, is consequently totally without representation, despite having produced memorable and significant titles like Blizzard's *Starcraft* and *Warcraft*, Westwood's *Dune* series (its Mega Drive incarnation not appearing elsewhere in the exhibition either), and Cavedog's *Total Annihilation*, the first RTS to feature fully-3D units. While there's no pleasing everyone, it's a controversial omission that the organisers would be well advised to reconsider next time around. **NAG**

TOP AMERICAN TEAMS SWITCH TO SOURCE FOR CGS

TEAM 3D. COMPLEXITY. EVIL Geniuses. These are the biggest names in North American *Counter-Strike*, having garnered countless top finishes in international tournaments for the past three years. And they have one more thing in common: they're all 1.6 teams. *CS: Source*, despite its improved graphics engine, has not been popular with the majority of professional gamers, receiving severe criticism from all but the most moderate commentators. However, following the recent announcement by DirecTV that their televised Championship Gaming Series would feature *Source* rather than 1.6, the top teams have had to bite the bullet and accept the new version of the game in order to compete.

DirecTV's announcement has sent shockwaves through the North American gaming community, achieving what both the Cyberathlete Professional League and the World Cyber Games failed to do two years ago. Cyber Evolution (CEVO), one of the USA's leading online prize-money leagues, has seen a mass deregistration from their 1.6 league and a mass entry into their *Source* league.

The two communities - the former 1.6

professionals and the new-school *Source* upstarts - have already been butting heads, in and out of the servers. Fans of 1.6 decry *Source* as a backwater community, which will be dominated by the crossover 1.6ers (as it was by Team 3D for a brief period in 2005). Nevertheless, the *Source* community has matured in recent times, producing at least two world-class teams of its own. Hyper, currently undefeated in CEVO's *Source* league, and EF Gaming, last year's Championship Gaming Invitational winners, have spent much more time learning the intricacies of *Source* play.

Jacob "Nightfall" Stanton, leader of team Hyper, has been outspoken about the *Source* community's strength, criticising 1.6 players for what he believes to be a lack of multi-gaming talent. "Many of these players will fail miserably in *CS: Source*," said Stanton in an interview with Gotfrag.com. "Very few (1.6) teams actually understand what's required of a championship team. If they did, there would be more consistent results."

Hyper currently hold third place in the CEVO *Source* league, trailing both Complexity, who are also undefeated, and

Team 3D, who have lost twice so far. As things stand, with less than half of the regular season remaining, three of the top six teams are former 1.6 powerhouses. **NAG**



SOURCE VS. 1.6 IN INTEL INVITATIONAL

MICROPROCESSOR GIANT INTEL, in partnership with Gotfrag TV, hosted a battle of worlds last month in its *Counter-Strike: Source* invitational tournament. Featuring the leading teams from both the *Source* and 1.6 communities, the event was the first taste of the competition to come in 2007. It was aired live on Gotfrag TV via a superb video stream (although it did require at least 1MB of bandwidth), and presented by Radio ITG's Marcus "DJ Wheat" Graham and Gotfrag's Trevor "Midway" Schmidt.

Complexity and Team 3D represented the former 1.6 teams, while Hyper and EF Gaming spoke for the *Source* community. A viewer poll reflected an overwhelming majority of fan support for Complexity, but as the tournament would show, it would not be the walkover everyone was expecting.

To determine which two teams would meet in the final, a round robin stage was played first. Round one featured the highly-anticipated encounter between Complexity and Hyper, as well as the more predictable Team 3D versus EF Gaming. Complexity started strong in their match on Dust2, winning the first half 9-6 and taking a commanding lead of 15-10 in the second. However, with only one round required to clinch the game, Hyper's Jacob "Nightfall" Stanton killed three Complexity members during an eco round (buying only pistols) to prevent the loss. Complexity were shocked beyond recovery. Four rounds later, the match was tied 15-15 and forced into overtime.

After the restart Complexity again jumped out to an early, although moderate lead. In the end, however, the 2-1 halftime score wasn't

enough of a cushion, and Hyper once more pulled things back in their favour, winning the second half 3-0, and with it the match. Nightfall's final score of 38 frags/25 deaths played an integral role, and it was largely this performance that secured him the tournament's Most Valuable Player award.

Meanwhile, Team 3D humiliated EF Gaming with a monstrous 16-5 score, notching up the first victory for the 1.6 camp and boosting their own confidence levels. But their next opponent, Hyper, was also coming off a big win. The map would be Nuke, notorious for favouring the defensive side (counter-terrorist), and 3D would have to play the more difficult terrorist half first.

Hyper came out firing on all cylinders, winning another remarkable eco round to take the early advantage away from 3D. 3D were able to limit the damage due to an impressive performance by Sal "Volcano" Garozzo, but still trailed 10-5 at the end of the first half.

Then all hell broke loose. From the very first round after the restart, 3D simply locked the map down, with flawless tactical positioning and communication. Running away with the first ten rounds in a row, they kept Hyper continually on the back foot and won the match 16-11 overall.

This result put Complexity in a must-win situation for their remaining two matches. After a close call of 16-12 against EF Gaming, they moved on to face the fired-up Team 3D. As Complexity, Hyper and 3D were all tied at one win and one loss each, the two spots in the final would be decided by score difference. With a difference of +16, Team 3D had virtually already secured their place, but

Complexity would have to beat them by more than three rounds or the second spot would go to Hyper.

In a result no one could have foreseen, Complexity raised their game to an unprecedented level on Train, taking the first half by a stunning 14-1 margin. Suddenly 3D's comfortable points situation was under serious threat. Unless they won the first three rounds in a row during the second half, their score difference would drop below Hyper's. A hard-fought opening pistol round saw 3D come out on top, but the momentum just didn't last. Complexity won the third and fourth rounds, ending the match at 16-3 and knocking 3D clean out of the tournament.

After such a tense round-robin stage, the final game had much to live up to. Nevertheless, the rematch between Complexity and Hyper did not disappoint. Complexity found it difficult to lock down the map (Train) as they did against Team 3D, and after the first half led by only one round (8-7). The neck-and-neck race continued into the second half until the scores were almost level again (11-10 in favour of Complexity), but, perhaps learning from their unfortunate first-round defeat, Complexity kicked into gear at the end to bring home the last five rounds. The final score was 16-10.

Complexity left the tournament with five Intel Core 2 Duo processors, while Hyper took home five SteelSeries GamerPacks (including headphones, keyboards and mouse pads). As Most Valuable Player, Jacob "Nightfall" Stanton received an Intel Core 2 Extreme processor. **NAG**

Thul are war-like and smelly. They excel at combat but hurt themselves trying to research muffins



DREAMLORDS

www.dreamlords.com

BECAUSE WE MISSED THE Beta period of *Dreamlords* and there is no trial planned for it, it was very difficult to decide exactly what kind of game *Dreamlords* is without actually subscribing. The Website is very enigmatic about the whole thing, and after a while, we could only imagine that *Dreamlords* is in fact some kind of odd crossbreed between *Civilization*, a Website and a separate RTS client that you have to download. That doesn't actually tell you much about the game itself, so we took the plunge and a few of us subscribed for a month.

We were surprised to find that they penalise one-month adopters (people who want to try it first for a month to see if they like it or not), by adding a dubious '\$5 'start-up fee'', which jacks up the price from \$15 to \$20. If you go for 90 days, however, it only sets you back \$40, and there is no '\$5 'starting fee''. Basically, they want you to choose paying more for longer, and if not, they'll milk an extra \$5 out of you. However, if you decide to continue playing after your first month, it is only \$15 from that point onward. Bit of a hard sell, but we were adamant to try the game and signed up anyway.

The RTS client you have to download is 531MB, which isn't bad compared to the usual 1.3GB or so you have to download for most MMORPGs. At the time of writing, a 20MB patch had already been released for the RTS

client, which can be downloaded directly from the Website or through the client itself.

As mentioned above, *Dreamlords* is split between two places where you play: the Website and the RTS client. How this works is rather novel: you manage your Patria (your personal island) through the Web page, building cities *Civilization* style and sending out explorers to find creatures to battle and quests to fulfil. Those quests and creatures appear as missions in the RTS client when one of your explorers is close enough. A mission runs like your standard RTS: you move your armies around (you select which units to take into battle before the battle), kill what needs to be killed or rescue what is in peril. As you complete missions, you gain Soul Shards, which are an important resource. It is used for building, hiring leaders for your cities and can also be converted to Gnosis, which are essentially what you need to level up your Dreamlord (you). Your Dreamlord itself is like an RPG character: you can assign points to traits and give it equipment to make it stronger in battle.

There is a lot you can do in the Web page side of the game: build armies, select research and even trade with fellow members of your Convergence or even people outside your Convergence. A Convergence is like a guild but much more involved - the idea behind *Dreamlords* is for a Convergence to

rise through the Strata until finally reaching the Inner Strata, thus winning the Era. An Era lasts about three months, according to the developers. A Convergence rises up in Strata by working together and completing special quests. Only the Archmage, an assigned player who takes the tax and uses it to unlock the special quests, can activate these special quests. The Chancellor, the leader of the guild, sets the tax rate on Soul Shards. A player can also be made a Warlord within the Convergence, and they are then responsible for the PvP battles, which yield another type of resource crucial to the Convergence. PvP in itself lets a Convergence win territories on the floating islands represented in the RTS client: the more territories a Convergence has the better.

Dreamlords is not a simple game and requires quite a bit of patience (you have limited Actions that can be taken, and once those are up you have to leave the game alone for a while until you generate more). *Dreamlords* actually rewards you if you play a more relaxed game: you have a Bonus bar that fills up when you are not playing. When you do play, the Bonus bar will give you a five times multiplier on the rewards from missions for a while. We think the strongest argument against *Dreamlords* is the steep price tag, especially with no trial to let players taste the game a little first. **NAG**

EXAMINING XNA

MICROSOFT'S LITTLE THREE LETTER ACRONYM THAT DOESN'T STAND FOR ANYTHING HAS BEEN GETTING A LOT OF ATTENTION OVER THE YEARS, EVER SINCE THAT NIFTY MORPHING APE-CREATURE VIDEO AT GDC 2004. HOWEVER, IT HAS FINALLY MANAGED TO BECOME SOMETHING CONCRETE WITH RECENT RELEASES LIKE GAME STUDIO EXPRESS AND THE FAMED 360 TIE-IN. IT'S TIME FOR US TO TAKE A LOOK AT XNA IN ITS ENTIRETY.

FIRSTLY, WHAT IS XNA ANYWAY?

ESSENTIALLY, XNA IS AN umbrella term for a very simple idea that we here at Game. Dev agree with wholeheartedly: games should be easier to create and people shouldn't reinvent the wheel all the time... XNA is Microsoft's attempt at a philosophy towards the process of game development that allows for the tedious or repetitive (or superfluous yet somehow 'necessary') tasks that riddle your typical game's production cycle, to take a back-seat to the more important activities of game design, gameplay refinement and the pursuit of fun. The basic idea is that XNA is supposed to free developers from constantly rewriting engines for that little extra ounce of speed, or handling resource issues so they don't come back to bite you a week from final Gold when you're already not sleeping...

Of course, being a Microsoft idea, XNA is firmly tied into the company's proprietary mindset and its existing products. For the most part, that's fine - Microsoft does make some pretty nifty things (unless you've been living under a rock and haven't seen Visual Studio in ages, or managed to spend some quality time with an Xbox 360 recently) - but for game development really to be easier, it would be great if 'cross-platform' meant more than just "compiles on two systems we own, don't even think of porting that to a Mac or we'll hit you."

Because XNA itself is a philosophy (or a brand, if you're into marketing-speak), it's actually made up of a whole slew of different products and packages that Microsoft offers.

THE XNA FRAMEWORK

The 'core' of XNA is a class library designed specifically for games. It's built on the .NET 2.0 Compact Framework, so we're talking about a managed system in C# that uses DirectX 9 (there will probably be a smooth upgrade to DirectX 10 once that's available). So already developers using XNA don't have to worry about tricky areas like memory management, which is traditionally a hairy area on consoles. The framework also provides standard classes for timing, game loops and other game logic, as well as various sections devoted to audio, graphics, input from both keyboard/mouse and gamepads, resource management (meshes and textures) and storage, among others. For many, this is the embodiment of the fundamental "stop writing boilerplate code" idea behind XNA...

The .NET Framework proved very effective in terms of business programming. It will be interesting to see how the XNA Framework fares with games. Debates on the comparative speeds of managed vs. non-managed code are already raging. However, they're pretty much moot arguments these days anyway: "We've got smart enough people working on garbage collection - as long as we don't have to worry about it in our games, we should be happy."



XNA BUILD

Every game has assets, resources that the code that runs the game uses to create all those fancy graphics and snazzy sounds: textures, meshes, sound files, levels, scripts, AI settings, etc. Traditionally, managing these resources is a time-consuming affair, often because developers may not realise the importance of maintaining proper versioning across projects and builds. It doesn't sound like such a big deal on paper, but when you have an office full of people all working on the same set of graphics information (often over a thousand individual files) that needs to be constantly up to date for different builds on different hardware (one might require a different texture format for all textures, or a different vertex setup per graphics chip), it's going to get pretty complex. Therefore, resources and keeping them organised are a source of many headaches for game development companies. XNA Build is a content management system that's supposed to automate a lot of that task... Exactly how it fares compared to other content management systems, like Avid's Alienbrain, remains to be seen. Hopefully it's not as complex and confusing as Microsoft's compilation management system, MS Build.

XNA STUDIO

Based on the Visual Studio 2005 Team System, XNA Studio is targeted at commercial game development houses and fills the role of a collaborative IDE (Integrated Development Environment) with XNA Build. Not much else is known about XNA Studio, other than it should help automate project management issues such as defect tracking, much like other team-centric development environments systems.

XNA GAME STUDIO EXPRESS

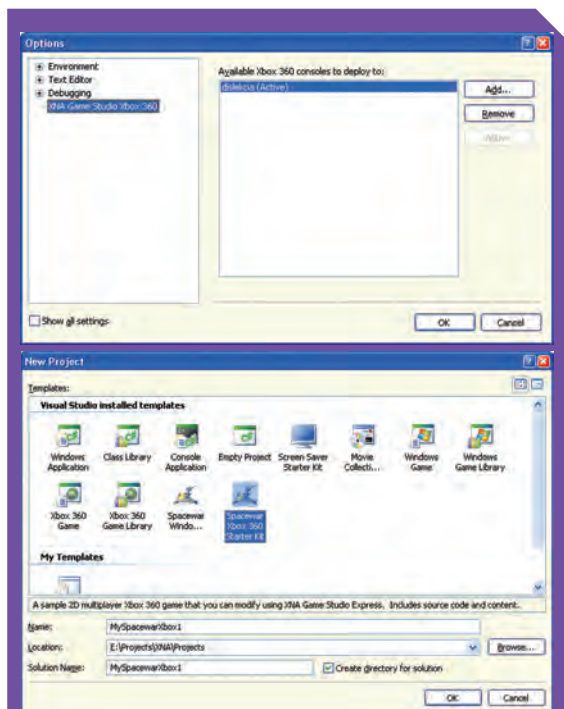
Finally, we get to what everyone is excited about: XNA Game Studio Express (or GSE). Designed as an IDE for students, hobbyists and other indie developers, GSE is essentially a set of plug-ins for Visual C# Express. It adds a host of project templates, the XNA Framework and documentation to a standard C# Express installation. The reason everyone's hyped up about GSE, however, is that it allows you to compile and deploy games to your Xbox 360... Provided,

of course, that you pay a subscription fee for the Creators Club on Xbox Live.

That aside, being able to run your own created content on a commercially purchased console is a really big thing! That's approaching the realm of the big developers with budgets that allow them to purchase expensive dedicated development kits. Of course, you do have to deal with a slew of restrictions to prevent you from going out there and selling your own software on an otherwise strictly regulated console. You can only distribute source code that other Creators Club members then compile for their 360s. You cannot simply connect to just any Xbox 360, and you are currently forced to use C# and the XNA Framework (although we're pretty sure workarounds will start appearing for this as the homebrew coders decide they'd rather reinvent wheels again).

Limitations notwithstanding, we haven't stressed enough how different a move this is by Microsoft. They know they need to ensure new and creative games on their platform, so they throw it open to indie developers: the unsung heroes of game innovation (when they're not busy copying other ideas). Development on the original Xbox was already much simpler than the other consoles of the time, but the XNA team has really done something special with a system that can compile the same code to both Windows and 360. Granted, the 360 itself is reasonably PC-like and has a reputation for being developer friendly (compared to the nightmares developers have about the internals of the PS3), but taking the original XDK and turning it into a reason for hobbyist and hopeful developers to buy a 360 is a very smart idea.

Unfortunately, there are some niggles with the XNA GSE. Most notably, it requires a certain amount of skill and experience to develop games in, and the lack of certain common game elements makes it a little daunting for beginners. However, the components system and a growing community of XNA developers should help in that regard, but it's still no Game Maker for your 360. Rather, it's a publicly available series of libraries that mean we can get our own games running on a store-bought console and we're pretty excited to get our teeth into it. **NAG**



GETTING STARTED WITH THE GSE AND BUILDING TO 360

Surprisingly, getting code compiling to your Xbox 360 is not a terribly arduous task, as long as you know what you're expected to do... There's a handy step-by-step explanatory video at <http://blogs.msdn.com/xna/archive/2007/01/09/video-getting-started-with-the-xna-creators-club.aspx> or on Xbox Live in Games → All Game Downloads → XNA Creators Club (scroll all the way down to the bottom). Here you will also find what you need to get your 360 talking to your PC.

The first step is to buy a subscription to the XNA Creators Club, and then download the XNA Game Launcher to your 360 - ignore the "You will need the full game to make use of this" message that pops up. Both are available on Xbox Live in the location given above.

Once your 360 is set, you'll need to download XNA Game Studio Express (v 1.0) to your PC and install it. The next step is to get your PC and 360 talking to each other. To do this you need to set encryption keys. Run the XNA Game Launcher (it'll be in Demos and More in the Games blade) and select the Settings button. Here you'll be able to generate a key. Write it down and enter it into your GSE options by going to the Tools menu → Options. Then scroll down to the bottom entry in the frame on the left 'XNA Game Studio Express Xbox 360' and add a new Xbox. Enter the key and go back and hit accept on your 360.

The final step is to open communications to your console by selecting 'Connect to PC' in the XNA Game Launcher and compiling some code on your PC... The video suggests creating a new project and loading the 'Spacewar Xbox 360 Starter Kit' and then compiling it by hitting F5. Viola - you're running your own code on your 360. Go wild!

NEWS: GAME MAKER 7.0 AVAILABLE!

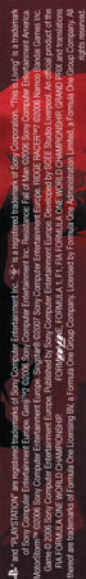
Game Maker version 7.0 was released on the last day of February, adding some new features and a host of fixes to various bugs. Among the new functionality is a completely redesigned extension system, allowing you to install new third-party packages with ease as well as upgrades to the graphics systems. The biggest change, however, is the recognition that GM games are commercially viable. To this end, the GM executable package has been reworked to make it compatible with third-party code wrappers (often used for registration systems by casual games portals) and an exciting partnership with aspiring portal YoYo Games.

The theory is that you will be able to publish

your game directly to the YoYo Games Website and community at the click of a single button in GM 7.0.

Best of all, GM still comes in two flavours: Registered and Unregistered (or Lite as it was previously known). Therefore, it's still free to use until you get your head around the more complex concepts and want more power. It will be interesting to see how the huge GM community responds to the YoYo Games move. There's already some hostility towards them in what is traditionally a rather rebellious user group. Time will tell though, especially if this makes it easier for indie developers to break into the online portal market.





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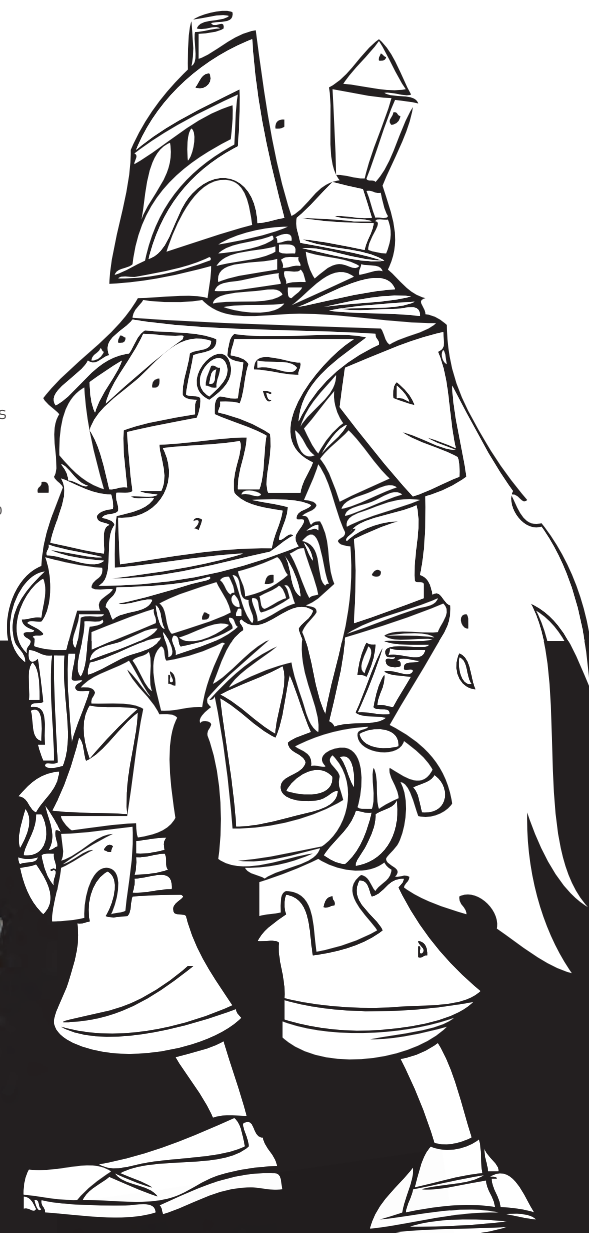
www.penny-arcade.com

PENNY ARCADE STARTED LIFE as a satirical computer and videogames Web comic back in 1998 on the game-development Website loonygames (now defunct). Since then, it has rapidly gained such a huge following that it now literally has its own E3 style convention called the Penny Arcade Expo (PAX).

The strip itself is about the exploits of fictional characters Tycho Brahe and Jonathan Gabriel who represent strip-creators Jerry Holkins (writer) and Mike Krahulik (illustrator) respectively. Monday, Wednesday and Friday each week, *Penny Arcade* comments on gaming and the surrounding culture with sharp wit and biting cynicism, but never really loses the sense of fun that has carried the strip for so long. The astute writing of wordsmith Holkins keeps the wit sharp and poignant, never dumbing things down, but still managing to say things in a way that can be understood, which no

doubt explains the wide appeal the strip has managed to gather. Krahulik's simplistic but appealing art conveys enough emotion and expression to make sure the joke isn't lost in shoddy artwork or composition. Over the years, *Penny Arcade* has visually improved by leaps and bounds as Krahulik continues to draw. These days, the duo even gets commissioned to produce specially made comics for various games, such as *Splinter Cell* and *Far Cry*, which then feature on the Website of the game.

Both Krahulik and Holkins actually make their living from *Penny Arcade*, making them few of the Web comic creators who actually do it as a job. Part of what makes this possible is the advertising and merchandise revenue *Penny Arcade* generates - merchandise such as the *Penny Arcade* books, Collectable Card game and likely also the upcoming *Penny Arcade* game. **NAG**



PA PRESENTS

www.penny-arcade.com/presents

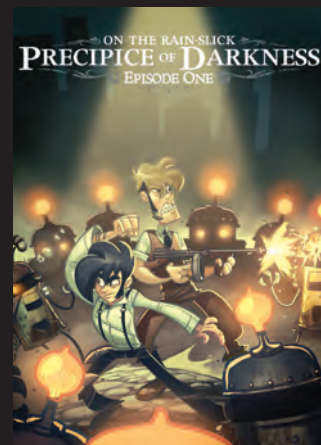
On the official Website you can find PA Presents, a collection of comics Gabe and Tycho have done for various games.

Empire Earth II, Splinter Cell, Brothers in Arms, World of Warcraft, Rainbow Six, Painkiller, Far Cry and other games all have specially created comics you can find here. The comics are usually hilarious in how they poke fun at the games themselves.



ON THE RAIN-SLICK PRECIPICE OF DARKNESS

Not unexpectedly, in August 2006, Penny Arcade announced *Penny Arcade Adventures: On the Rain-Slick Precipice of Darkness*. An adventure game set to be distributed episodically via download, the game is a collaboration between Hothead Games and the creators of the strip. It is being written by Tycho and all the art is being designed by Gabe himself. The game is based on the *Penny Arcade* characters and universe, and is sure to be faithful to the humour and irreverent style of the Web comic. To date, no release date has been announced.



SHOPPING THE PLAYSTATION'S ONLINE STORE IS FUN AND CONVENIENT.



THE PENNY ARCADE COLLECTION

You can buy these from www.thinkgeek.com at \$12.95 a book and there are currently three:

- **Attack of the Bacon Robots**, which contains the complete *Penny Arcade* collection from 1998 through 2000, and each strip has accompanying creator commentary by Tycho, who reflects back on each strip and gives a little bit of insight into why they were crazy enough to draw that. It also contains a sketchbook section with a few choice selections from Gabe's early artwork. The early *Penny Arcade* years certainly show their age in terms of art. Gabe has come a long way since, but the humour still manages to illicit a chuckle (especially when you read the strips in context of what we know now, as Tycho points out).
- **Epic Legends of the Magic Sword Kings**, which features all strips from the year 2001, each one with creator commentary and even a few news posts that were never originally published. A full-colour gallery features artwork from the *Penny Arcade* CCG. Be sure to check out the foreword by Microsoft's J. Allard.
- **The WarSun Prophecies** is the complete 2002 strip-collection and the creator commentaries make a welcome return along with more *Penny Arcade* news posts that were never posted. Scott Kurtz of 'other gaming Web comic' *Player vs. Player* (www.pvponline.com) fame actually wrote the foreword for this issue, and he certainly tells Tycho and Gabe exactly what he thinks of them.



PENNY ARCADE: THE CCG

Since the *Penny Arcade* CCG makes use of the Universal Fighting System (UFS), it's probably incorrect to call it a Collectible Card Game. When you buy the *Penny Arcade* card game (which was available at ThinkGeek for \$24.99, but has since been discontinued until further notice), you get two complete decks that represent Tycho and Gabe. A deck is like a character and all of the cards in it have been especially designed to take that character into consideration. UFS CCGs can be played against another UFS CCG and you can find UFS decks for characters from popular videogames such as *Soul Calibur* and have Taki vs. Gabe fights if you want to. Best of all, all UFS decks are tournament legal.

Each deck comes in a sturdy plastic deck box and contains everything you need to sit down and start playing immediately. The cards feature all-new art from Gabe, and Tycho wrote the flavour text. A personal favourite from the Gabe deck is 'Polysyllabic', which requires you to choose a word printed on a card your opponent has in play, and then your attack damage equals the number of letters in the chosen word.



MOVIES

AT THE CINEMA: 300

HITTING OUR BIG SCREENS at the end of March is *300*, the film adaptation of Frank Miller's graphic novel. It's the story of 300 Spartan soldiers who fought to the death against the mighty Persian army during the Battle of Thermopylae. Their deaths brought the people of Greece together to unite and take on the Persians, changing the course of history. Miller's own work was inspired by a movie: the 1962 epic *The 300 Spartans*. Even today, you can find the large statue of King Leonidas, who led the small army, in Thermopylae. However,

this adaptation leans more towards Miller's style and historical accuracy. Some critics have called it *Gladiator* meets *Sin City*. Overall, *300* hasn't been basking in critical acclaim, but everyone seems to agree that it services the "blood and guts" demographic, meaning us. Everyone spoke with their wallets, though: *300*'s opening weekend netted it over \$70 million, well ahead of any ancient warrior epic you could think of. People at NAG have been drooling over the trailers since they first appeared. We're definitely getting tickets.



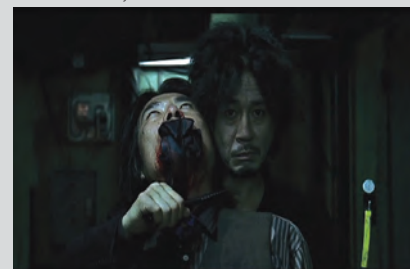
Oldboy

Cast: Choin Min-Sik, Yoo Jo-Tae, Gang Hye-Jung
Director: Park Chanwook
Genre: Thriller
Rating: 18

A man is arrested and supposedly goes to jail, but instead finds himself in solitary confinement where someone keeps him captive for fifteen years, during which time he obviously becomes more focused on revenge (and insanity). Then, suddenly, he is released with a new suit and a cellphone and is given five days to figure out who did this to him and why. Naturally, he's pressed for time, so he's not going about the process nicely.

The movie: If someone's trying to push good Asian movies on you, *Oldboy* will definitely show up eventually. It's a South Korean gem about revenge and mystery, interlaced with a love story and some memorable violence, especially one scene of a corridor fight involving a hammer. However, the harder part of the movie is the headspace it operates in. The director said that he doesn't like movies that encourage passivity. This certainly won't leave you comfortable.

The DVD: An interview with the director, deleted scenes and commentary.



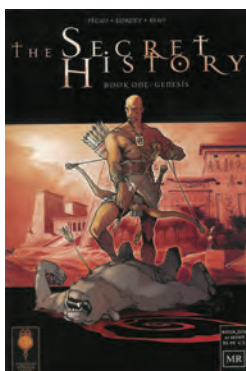
COMICS

Written by Clint Burmeister

The Secret History – Book 1: Genesis

Format: Comic Mini-Series
Publisher: Archaia Studio Press
Writer: Jean-Pierre Pe'cau
Artist: Igor Kordey
Price: R64.95

What if four ancient rune stones of immense power were behind some of the cataclysmic and miraculous events throughout history? What if the deeds of these stones and their bearers were sometimes mistaken for the miracles of God or nature's wrath? *The Secret History Book 1* begins with an apocalyptic event and follows the stones into their first stage in history: the biblical time surrounding the Israelites' escape from Egypt. The comic is nicely put together, but it may offend some readers with its take on religion.



Chibi Vampire Vol 1

Format: Manga TP
Publisher: Tokyopop
Created by: Yuna Kagesaki
Price: R99.95

So, what happens when you get a cute little girl, with a bit of a strange family, going through some embarrassing situations at school and work? Sound like your typical manga so far? Oh, and did I mention she's a vampire, or not really a vampire, but rather a vampire with a twist. This is a really enjoyable story with a refreshing new idea about vampires, and presented with nice artwork and an easy to read writing style. I give it a thumbs-up, whether you're a manga fan or just in the mood for something different.



Borat

Cast: Sascha Baron Cohen, The People of America
Director: Larry Charles
Genre: Comedy
Rating: 18 LNPS

Borat Sagdiyev is one of Kazakhstan's top television reporters and is sent to the United States to learn more about the country to help the people of his own country. So he goes around the States, interviewing various people and getting a deeper perspective on how America works. He also develops an obsession with Pamela Lee Anderson and sets off to try and find her.

The Movie: You know who *Borat* is, and if you don't, you should know who Ali G is. If you don't, don't watch this movie. The film created about as much money as it did controversy and this DVD is bound to be popular.

The DVD: Now here's the funny bit: we couldn't locate the special features on the DVD. This might be a menu oversight or perhaps we were missing something, but no amount of stabbing on the remote revealed any other menu options. We're guessing this is a mistake that'll be fixed soon, but best check your copy before you pay for it.



Thank You for Smoking

Cast: Aaron Eckhart, William H. Macy, Katie Holmes
Director: Jason Reitman
Genre: Comedy
Rating: 13 LS

Nick Naylor is really good at one thing: talking. As a lobbyist for the tobacco industry, he makes sure that bad press and health reports don't land the cigarette giants in hot water. Then an anti-tobacco senator decides to take on the cause and get skulls and crossbones onto cigarette packets. Along the way, though, Nick looks at getting cigarettes back into the movies.

The movie: This very sly and dry comedy is smart enough not to think it's very clever, but in fact, it is. *Thank You for Smoking* isn't really about smoking, though the tobacco companies play a central role in it. It's about the gift of the gab – the art of spin. At the same time, it pokes fun at both the smoking and anti-smoking sides of the debate.

The DVD: Apart from Commentary and Deleted Scenes, features on the movie's themes and its making.



A Scanner Darkly

Cast: Keanu Reeves, Woody Harrelson, Winona Ryder
Director: Richard Linklater
Genre: Sci-Fi/Thriller
Rating: 16L

In the near future, a narcotics agent finds himself trapped between two worlds. While working undercover for the government to fight drugs, he also leads a double life as a user and dealer of a mind-altering substance simply known as 'D'. As the two worlds grow tighter around him, the stress mounts and he starts to question his sanity.

The Movie: *A Scanner Darkly* doesn't sound like the kind of film it really is. In reality, it's Philip K. Dick's look at the Nixon government versus the acid-fueled counter-culture revolution of the time – so it's deep stuff. Moreover, unlike movies that used Dick's work as a basis (*Blade Runner*, *Minority Report*), this is more faithful and more cerebral. That said, even if the subject matter bores you, the interesting live-action-to-animation effect is stunning and worth seeing in action. Fans of the author or more meaty movies should give this a look as well.

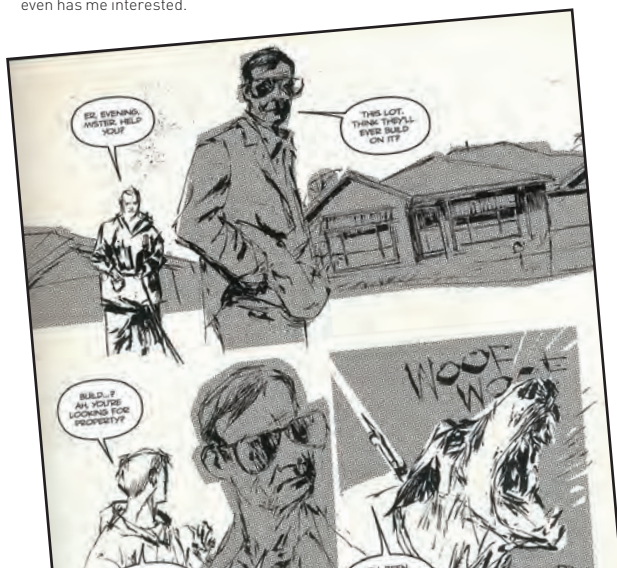
The DVD: A documentary on the movie subject; one about the animation and commentary.



D'Airain Adventure #1

Format: Comic Series
Publisher: IDW
Writer: Wood / Louise / Ryall
Artist: Ashley Wood
Price: R45.95

So, Ashley Wood sits down, draws a few panels of unrelated comics, and then gets a writer who tries to write a story involving said panels... That was my first impression of the comic's three individual mini stories. Chaotic, unravelled, and maybe pulled from the creators' collective brains a little too soon. But then again, if you've ever seen Ashley Wood's art, you'd have to expect the stories would be a little twisted. And the concept of "zombies vs. robots" even has me interested.



Nextwave: Agents of H.A.T.E. vol 1

Format: Graphic Novel
Publisher: Marvel
Writer: Warren Ellis
Artist: Stuart Immonen
Price: R129.95

Nextwave is a comic series about "five pirate superheroes twisting the nipple of the military-industrial complex... and healing America by beating people up," in the words of writer Warren Ellis. This isn't a comic about good morals and life lessons. Instead, it's a fun dose of insanity featuring dragon monsters wearing purple underpants and bio-engineered enemy soldiers whose closest relatives are probably broccoli – all put together by one of the best comic writers of our time. What more could you ask for?



RAVEN'S LOFT SMELLS LIKE DENTAL SURGERY...

ONE OF THE GREAT things about *Magic: The Gathering* is the fact that different people react differently to individual cards. In light of that, am I the only person (barring about three other people I've spoken to) who thinks Extirpate is completely broken and is likely to warp the metagame? (Aside: for those of you who are not familiar with this terminology, it refers to the types and variety in types of decks being played in a particular environment – the tournament scene, for example, where the term is particularly relevant. When a metagame is 'warped', it means that a card or small set of cards is found to be so overwhelmingly strong, that everyone is forced to either play it, or design their decks specifically to play against it.) Therefore, this month this column is something of a rant...

It is a well-known fact that one of the best ways to build a deck in such a manner that it will consistently play according to its intended game plan is to use the maximum allowed number of each of the important cards: four in most cases. So, for instance, a control-orientated white deck is very often going to be running four Wrath of Gods, because the player needs to be able to reliably clear the board by turn 4 or 5 of the game, or as a failsafe should the opponent be getting ahead in terms of army development, or in order to spring a trap in order to net card advantage – you get the general idea. Running just one or two Wraths is not optimal, as the player cannot reasonably count on drawing one before it is too late, unless the player is using some form of tutor to fetch the Wrath. Permission decks, in a similar vein, like to run multiples of their efficient, effective counter spells, and this is particularly true of the likes of Rune Snag, which are next to useless as

singletons. Now along comes Extirpate, at the prohibitive cost of ONE MANA, at instant speed, and UNCOUNTERABLE – hell, you can't even respond to it by depriving it of a target – and removes an entire component from a well-tuned deck. Yuck!

BENT OUT OF SHAPE

Therefore, it is ironic that even players who claim the card is not broken still confide that their decks are built to be Extirpate-resistant. Of course, they don't say so in so many words, but what they indicate about their decks' structure is suggestive, at the very least!

So what can we do to combat Extirpate? The most obvious measure we can take is to build our decks with singletons and two-ofs: that is, to not have more than two copies of any given card in our decks. Well, this is great in theory, but many cohesive strategies suffer when subjected to such a restriction. Also, keep in mind that you may be dodging card disadvantage, but your opponent will be getting a good look at the contents of your hand and your library. So if you are playing permission, for instance, forget about maintaining bluff!

What else? Well, we can play hand destruction and other utility spells such as Hide/Seek (the Seek half) to try to extract these cards before they are played. Alternatively, we can all add Leyline of the Void to our decks in order to not have any cards in graveyards at all, effectively shutting down Extirpate. We can proactively use something like Moratorium Stone to keep emptying our graveyards of cards we don't want targeted. However, remember, once your opponent has an Extirpate and one black mana available, he/she will be able to respond to the Stone's activation to remove

the intended target and all its copies anyway! Or we can play Extirpate in our decks, and hope that the opponent plays one, then Extirpate his/her Extirpate – if you can't beat 'em, join 'em! Of course, a set of Extirpates does involve a substantial monetary investment... Sounds like fun, huh? **NAG**

Alex Jelagin



I am curious to gauge people's opinion of this card, so please drop me a line at alex.jelagin@tidemedia.co.za, and let me know what you think. Also, let me know whether you play casually, competitively or both, and what your favourite formats are. If I receive enough responses, I will publish the results in an upcoming issue.

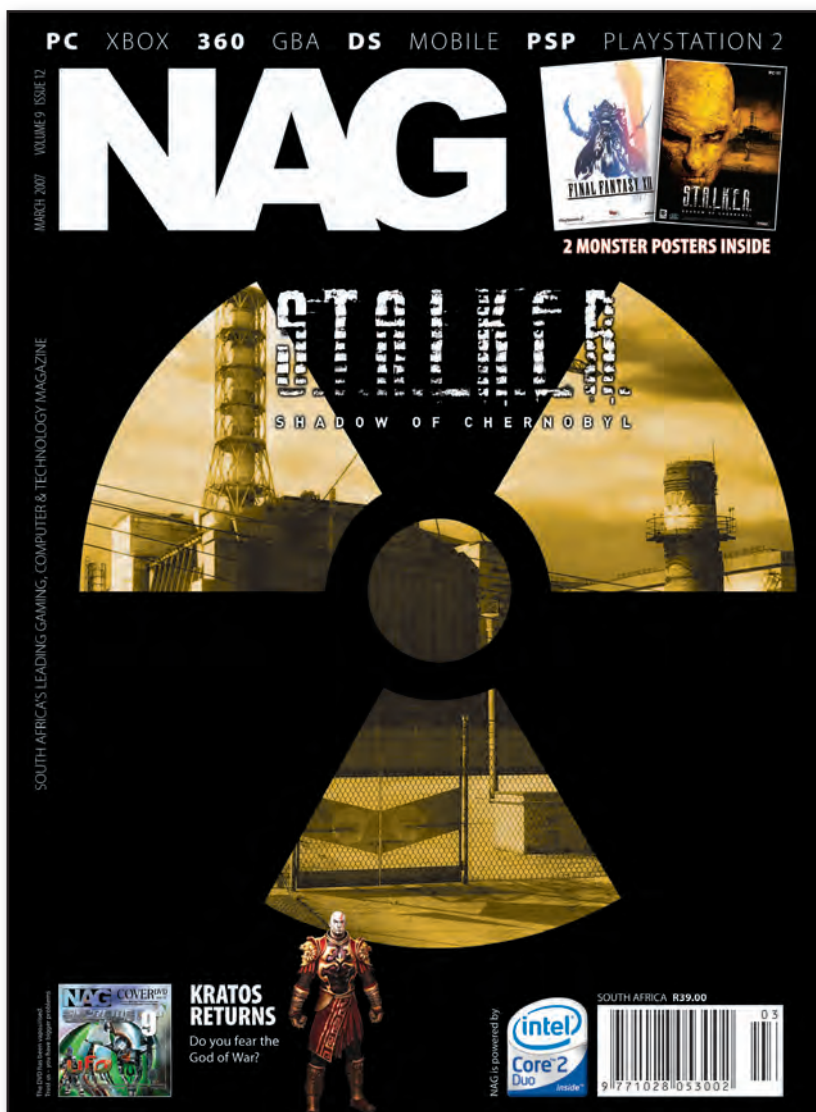


SCRYING THE SYNERGIES

Well, enough of the complaining – let's take a look at what works with Extirpate. Because it requires its target to be in the graveyard, we should consider ways to put things there. There are the obvious approaches: destroy stuff, or force your opponent to sacrifice it from play. To this end, Dark Banishing, Putrefy, Mortify, Wrath of God, Damnation, Smallpox, Stone Rain, Necrotic Sliver and any number of other cards do the trick, for a variety of card types. Furthermore, consider the Groundbreaker – this creature comes into play cheaply, hits hard, and then dies. Perfect target! And without even having to dispose of it first!

Other ways to 'bury' stuff, as it were, include hand destruction (spells and abilities that force discards) and counter magic. Hand destruction is particularly nasty in this regard: against the typical opponent, a Coercion allows you to look at your opponent's hand and pick what you least want to face – then Extirpate it, and they're all gone! Against a permission mage, the prospect is almost as rosy: say, for instance, that your opponent counters your Coercion – no problem, now you can get rid of all other copies of that counter spell (which may well have been your choice of Coercion target in any case!). And now you also get to see your opponent's hand, and choose your next disruption...

The long and short of it: Extirpate works with just about any tool in the typical control mage's arsenal!



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